

**Hilary Putnam's Internal Realism
and Postliberal Theology**

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To Darren,
all my family,
and in memory of my father-in-law,
Bill McKinnon

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the theological appropriation of 'postmodern' or 'antirealist' strands in contemporary philosophy. The examples considered in detail are the 'internal realist' philosophy of Hilary Putnam, and George Lindbeck's 'postliberal' theology as outlined in his book, *The Nature of Doctrine*.

Putnam has developed what he calls 'internal realism' as an attempt to forge a middle path between realism and relativism. 'Relativism' is defined broadly as saying that our viewpoint is always particular and local. Thus the world of knowledge, fact and value is radically dependent on a local language. Since there is no neutral language available for us to judge these particular local languages, it follows that one view may be considered as 'good' as any another. Putnam's internal realism concedes that what we call 'objective knowledge' is always description from a particular point of view, yet does not require us to revise our ordinary understanding and use of 'objective'. Our beliefs are never context-free, but there is still such a thing as getting it right and getting it wrong. So Putnam claims to hold a neo-Kantian position which accepts the postmodern critique of a neutral rationality but which avoids relativism.

George Lindbeck also claims that postliberal theology sets up a methodology which allows a middle way. Postliberal theology has some of its origins in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, in particular his concept of 'language-games'. These have their own rules (grammar) and vocabulary, and they are internally consistent. That is, they create their own conditions of meaning. A religion for George Lindbeck is a language-game, what he calls a 'cultural-linguistic' system. The community of faith defines itself through its language and practice. However, I suggest religions cannot be construed as Wittgensteinian language-games and that Lindbeck's project falls into an unwanted relativism.

The conclusion of the thesis is that Putnam's internal realism is unable to provide support for Lindbeck's postliberal position. It is further concluded that Putnam's philosophy is more reminiscent of the kind of liberal theology (opposed by Lindbeck) typified by the work of the Catholic theologian, David Tracy.

This thesis is my own work and does not include any material which has been submitted for another degree at this or any other university. All debts to others have been acknowledged in the footnotes and in the bibliography.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Where used, all book and article titles are reproduced in full in the main body of the text for ease of reading. Abbreviations for frequently cited texts are used in the footnotes.

The abbreviations used are:

Hilary Putnam:

<i>MFR</i>	<i>The Many Faces of Realism</i>
<i>MMS</i>	<i>Meaning and the Moral Sciences</i>
<i>Pr.</i>	<i>Pragmatism</i>
<i>R&R</i>	<i>Representation and Reality</i>
<i>RHF</i>	<i>Realism with a Human Face</i>
<i>RP</i>	<i>Renewing Philosophy</i>
<i>RTH</i>	<i>Reason, Truth and History</i>
<i>W&L</i>	<i>Words and Life</i>

George Lindbeck:

<i>TND</i>	<i>The Nature of Doctrine</i>
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis will explore a significant theological appropriation of 'postmodern' or 'nonrealist' strands from contemporary philosophy. The examples considered in detail will be the 'internal realist' philosophy of Hilary Putnam, and George Lindbeck's 'postliberal' theology as outlined in his book, *The Nature of Doctrine*.¹

My main contention will be that Hilary Putnam's internal realism - a middle path between realism and antirealism - may help move the philosophical and theological conversations forward. In particular, I will be arguing that Putnam's philosophy avoids a destructive scepticism, as seen in the guises of relativism and incommensurability.

Relativism is defined broadly as saying that our viewpoint is always particular and local. So, the world of knowledge, fact and value is radically dependent on a local language. One of the outcomes of relativism is that, since there is no neutral language available for us to judge these particular local languages, it follows that one view may be considered as 'good' as any another. The connected concept of *incommensurability* says that theories (or languages, cultures or 'conceptual schemes')

¹ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, London, 1984.

may be so radically different that they are not at all comparable. Again, there is no neutral way for us to approach them. These issues have clear and significant implications for ethics (what may be right or good) and epistemology (what we may know).²

The positive aspect of Hilary Putnam's philosophy is that, while his 'internal realism' concedes that what we call 'objective knowledge' is always description from a particular point of view, it does not require us to revise our ordinary understanding and use of 'objective'. Our beliefs are never context-free, but there is still such a thing as getting it right and getting it wrong. Putnam, therefore, claims to hold a neo-Kantian position which accepts the postmodern critique of a neutral rationality but which avoids relativism. While it may seem obvious why scepticism in these forms should be avoided, the problems involved are complex ones - sceptical worries can arise from legitimate concerns. Part of Putnam's approach (following the work of Wittgenstein) is to try and understand why we may find ourselves following unfruitful sceptical forms of thinking.

² For example, moral and cultural relativism are used to justify many different kinds of action: the ethics of 'communitarianism' informs current political debates; the difficulties (and deadly breakdown) in communication between particular religious or ethnic groups from Bosnia to Northern Ireland. An illustration: during a political discussion on the future of Northern Ireland on BBC Radio 4 in the week of writing this chapter (August 19, 1996), it was suggested that the reason that Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland find it so hard to engage in discussion is that they 'speak different languages' and therefore have 'different thought processes' to the extent that it is impossible for them to *converse* at all let alone agree on anything. Even more interestingly, it was further claimed that these two incommensurable languages were a result of incommensurable *theologies*.

George Lindbeck also claims that his 'postliberal' theology sets up a methodology in theology which tries to find a way forward without falling into relativism and scepticism. Postliberal theology has some of its origins in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, in particular his concept of 'language-games'. These have their own rules (grammar) and vocabulary, and they are internally consistent. That is, they create their own conditions of meaning. A religion for George Lindbeck is a language-game, what he calls a 'cultural-linguistic' system. So, the community of faith defines itself through its language and practice. However, I conclude that religions cannot be construed as Wittgensteinian language-games and that Lindbeck's project falls into an unwanted relativism.

The origins of this thesis came from a desire to see whether, and to what degree, certain types of philosophical inquiry (particularly from the area of philosophy called the philosophy of language) were connected with current theological debate. My own background has been in the philosophy of language and, following from that, in research exploring particular aspects of so-called 'natural language' systems in the field of Artificial Intelligence (Knowledge-Based Systems).³

I came to theology, then, with a considerable interest in general philosophical issues of meaning and, particularly in the context of Artificial Intelligence, the emergence

³ In particular, I worked on an attempt to formalise (as part of a computer interface) elements of Gricean linguistic philosophy. See H. P. Grice, 'Logic and Conversation' in *Syntax and Semantics Vol. 3* (eds.) Cole and Morgan, New York, 1975, pp. 41-58.

of practical models for 'mapping reality'. My initial concern in theology was to see how issues of meaning were approached. For example, how are certain words central to theology and religions used and considered (do they refer)? Are there specific religious interpretations of the world? What sort of logic or rules do they follow? Are different religious interpretations incommensurable? Can the tenets of a religious faith only be understood by the believer?

There is, of course, a fierce debate in contemporary theology concerning all these matters. As might have been anticipated, this debate can often centre around the ontological status of religious statements. Are they the sorts of thing which are true or false? What are the objects of faith? Where does a 'religious interpretation of the world' originate - for example, from culture or from some inner experience? These issues raise questions, not only about the nature of language, but about whole approaches to theological methodology. Chapter One will investigate these concerns.

Broadly, of course, philosophers, theologians, scientists, mathematicians and mystics have debated over many centuries what the world is 'really like'. Their resulting descriptions and theories have sometimes agreed with each other; often they have not. The twentieth century has also provided some revolutions in how we look at the world. Quantum physics, for example, has emphasised the vital influence of the observer on what is observed. It is perhaps more obvious to us than at any other time, that we are able to choose between descriptions. As a result of this,

overarching theories and ‘big pictures’ of the world have started to be treated with some suspicion.⁴ World wars, the Holocaust, the failure of Marxism have underlined the dangers of ideology. We now have graphic and disturbing examples of how our words can shape the world, both for better and for worse. This emphasis on the creative force of language, and a disillusionment with so-called ‘Enlightenment values’, has given birth to what has been called ‘postmodernism’. This is a somewhat amorphous term, but with wide contemporary currency, whose background and influence will also be considered in Chapter One’s overview.

Chapter Two follows this broad overview of the current debate with a consideration of the philosophy of Hilary Putnam. Although Putnam’s name may not yet be familiar to many theologians, his importance in recent analytical philosophy is unquestioned. The 1990 *Festschrift* for Putnam contains contributions from a range of philosophers, including Dummett, Block, Fodor, Katz, and Nussbaum, who speak very highly of Putnam and his work. George Boolos, who edits the collection, says that “A number of us regard Hilary’s work, including his teaching, as the most important influence on our intellectual lives.”⁵ Similarly, Hartry Field (who we will see later is critical of Putnam’s ‘internal realism’) says Putnam has

⁴ However, it is interesting to note that, as we have discarded some ‘big pictures’, other overarching theories have gained acceptance, often with worrying lack of criticism, e.g., the picture provided by ‘free market forces’. In addition, the scientific goal of an ultimate overarching ‘theory of everything’ (the so-called Grand Unification Theory) is increasingly seen as achievable, and has entered the popular imagination through books such as Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time* (London, 1988).

⁵ George Boolos (ed.), *Meaning and Method: Essays in Honour of Hilary Putnam*, Cambridge, 1990, p. vii.

had an “enormous influence” and that one of his valuable attributes as a philosopher is that he “raises the right questions.”⁶ In another recent collection of papers, Peter Clark and Bob Hale cite Putnam’s “substantial and highly influential contributions” to a wide range of philosophical issues.⁷

Putnam has continued to be very influential despite also having a reputation as a philosopher who has often changed his mind over important issues (I will suggest below that this is a strength rather than a weakness). James Conant, who has now edited two volumes of Putnam’s papers, admits that Putnam’s “substantive philosophical views ... tend to exist in a condition of perpetual flux”.⁸ This, Conant notes, seems to be partly dependent on who Putnam’s current philosophical ‘heroes’ are. That is, Putnam has often pursued his philosophical interests in the context of, and had those interests shaped by, his reading and teaching of the work of other philosophers. Conant also talks about Putnam’s own *motivations* - he says that there is a faithfulness and honesty in Putnam’s approach to the original attraction and excitement involved in the tackling of philosophical questions. Conant says this is very important, especially now

at a point in the history of our culture when so many of
philosophy’s official practitioners have come to accept the

⁶ Ibid., p. 213.

⁷ Peter Clark and Bob Hale (eds.), *Reading Putnam*, Cambridge MA and Oxford, 1994, p. 1. The areas of Putnam’s contribution include epistemology; logic; the philosophy of science; mathematics; and the philosophy of physics. (Clark and Hale apologise for the unfortunate omission of articles in their book concerning Putnam’s contribution to the philosophy of mind.)

⁸ James Conant, Introduction to Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, Cambridge MA and London, 1990, p. xvii. Rather more unkindly, John Passmore has said that “to write about ‘Putnam’s philosophy’ is like trying to capture the wind with a fishing net.” John Passmore, *Recent Philosophers*, London, 1985, p.92.

idea that compromising their original sense of excitement and hope is simply an inevitable part of the cost of the professionalization of their subject.⁹

John Haldane believes that “Putnam is a philosopher of the first rank” and says that this estimation is widely accepted, but does concede that Putnam is also often thought to be inconsistent.¹⁰ However, Haldane thinks that there has been “more continuity than change” in Putnam’s output and commends Putnam for being an intuitive, creative and “increasingly humanistic” philosopher.¹¹ As we shall see in later chapters, the human perspective is very significant in Putnam’s work.

Putnam’s background in mathematics and the philosophy of science gives him a thorough understanding of both the formal and practical problems in the attempt to ‘describe reality’. Chapter Two will explore in detail Putnam’s criticisms of one influential attempt to do this, that is, concerning what he refers to as ‘metaphysical’ or ‘scientific’ realism.

What is interesting is that Putnam himself used to be a ‘metaphysical’ realist of the sort he now criticises. In fact, he is very candid about the views that he has previously held (in ‘another life’ he says) and now repudiates. This candidness is, I think, part of the reason that Putnam has been considered inconsistent. It is not generally thought to be a strength either to change a considered philosophical

⁹ Conant, p. lxxiv.

¹⁰ John Haldane, ‘Humanism with a Realist Face’, a review of Putnam’s *Renewing Philosophy*, in *Philosophical Books*, Vol. 35, 1994, p. 21.

¹¹ Ibid.

position, nor to admit to the changes quite so readily! However, Putnam is clearly not any sort of philosophical dilettante (Haldane is correct to say that there is 'more continuity than change' in Putnam's work). Also, and unusually for a philosopher in the analytical tradition, he is open about how considering philosophical problems make us *feel*. He thinks that in philosophy it is possible not simply to change one's mind, but to actually feel *torn* between two opposing philosophical positions. A good philosopher, he implies, will understand the pull of both. He says that, "When I was a 'scientific realist', I felt deeply troubled by the difficulties with scientific realism; having given up scientific realism, I am still tremendously aware of what is appealing about scientific realism."¹² Appreciating these tensions, I think, gives Putnam a valuable viewpoint from which to write about philosophical problems.¹³

Theologians, however, have been slow to pick up on Putnam's alternative vision, despite its promise of a productive 'middle path' between dogmatism and scepticism. However, it will be suggested in the next chapter that many theologians are not necessarily interested in a middle path, but rather are concerned to use the opening given to them by 'postmodernism' or nonrealist philosophies to carve out a distinctive niche for theology. The difficulty is, of

¹² Hilary Putnam, *Representation and Reality*, Cambridge MA, 1988, p. xii.

¹³ Putnam has recently also been more open about his own Jewish faith. He says that he once endeavoured to keep his faith and philosophical work separate, but now is "someone for whom the religious dimension of life has become increasingly important." (Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, Cambridge MA. and London, 1992, p. 1.) Although Putnam does not write directly about theology, we shall see in Chapter Six of this thesis the importance he sees in traditional cultures (including religious ones).

course, that they are opening themselves up to the danger, identified by Putnam, of authoritarianism and dogmatism.

Theologians who have appropriated these strands from contemporary philosophy, or at least have provided some sort of analysis of them, have been much more likely to refer to Richard Rorty or to Jacques Derrida than to Putnam.¹⁴ Rorty, like Putnam, is an American philosopher from the analytic tradition, but who has forged his own brand of 'neo-pragmatism'. This is influenced to a large extent by continental philosophy and especially by the work of Derrida. Putnam's long-running battles with Rorty (which have served to sharpen both their views) will be referred to throughout this thesis.

It also turns out that theologians who refer to Putnam have tended not to consider his work since *Reason, Truth and History*, published in 1981, and as a result often too readily categorise him as an nonrealist philosopher (we shall see why in Chapter Two).¹⁵ For example, this is the case in an otherwise interesting attempt to apply Putnam's philosophy to theology made by William Robinson.¹⁶ He notes the influence of the realism/antirealism debate on theology, citing Torrance

¹⁴ Janet Martin Soskice has referred favourably to Putnam: see, for example, 'Theological Realism' in *The Rationality of Religious Belief* (eds.) Abraham and Holtzer, Oxford, 1987, pp. 105-119, and also *Metaphor and Religious Language*, Oxford, 1985. However, Soskice's interest is in Putnam's 'causal theory' of reference, a view Putnam once shared with Saul Kripke, but now repudiates. The causal theory is not considered in this thesis.

¹⁵ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge, 1981.

¹⁶ W. D. Robinson, 'Reason, Truth and Theology', *Modern Theology* Vol. 2, No. 2, January 1986, pp. 87-105.

and Hebblethwaite on the side of realism and Cupitt on the nonrealist side. Referring to Putnam's belief that the realism/antirealism distinction is unhelpful, Robinson says that a philosophy "seeking the eradication of the dichotomy surely invites attention, not least from theologians."¹⁷ Robinson wants to explore "what theologies may be possible in the light of Putnam's position."¹⁸ He calls this position that of a "*qualified* antirealist",¹⁹ but he does also admit that Putnam "wishes to retain something more of Kant than Rorty does", which we shall see in Chapter Two is a significant distinction between them.²⁰

Another article, again also responding to *Reason, Truth and History*, categorises Putnam alongside (amongst others) both Rorty and Nelson Goodman.²¹ William Dean here says that what these philosophers have in common is that they have all "argued that truths are entirely historical creatures".²² He cites Cornell West and Jeffrey Stout as those in theology who have been most influenced by this view. All these thinkers, says Dean, reject foundationalism and realism. As already suggested, it will be argued in this thesis that Putnam does not 'reject realism' (although he does reject *metaphysical* realism). The difference in Putnam's position compared to the other people Dean has mentioned is actually suggested by Dean

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 97.

²¹ William Dean, 'The Challenge of the New Historicism', *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 66, No. 3, July 1986, pp. 261-281..

²² Ibid. p. 261.

himself as he claims that Putnam's work is "distinctive in its efforts to save the new historicism from the dangers of relativism."²³

More recently, Putnam is mentioned by John Milbank in his 1990 *Theology and Social Theory*.²⁴ Milbank discusses Putnam's philosophy in the context of the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, and compares Putnam's rejection of incommensurability favourably in contrast to MacIntyre's acceptance of it. Putnam's discussion of incommensurability (considered in the light of Wittgenstein's comments on religious belief) is examined in Chapter Three.

A review of Putnam's *Realism with a Human Face* by Stephen B. Wall-Smith in the *Christian Century* is also refreshing since he is clear that Putnam holds "impeccable realist credentials".²⁵ Wall-Smith thinks that Putnam is ploughing a lonely furrow, though, in his pursuit of a middle way. He says,

... it is difficult to see how a thinker who trades in such concepts as 'intuition', 'conscience' and 'community' will build many bridges to analytical extremists. ... However, this book may succeed in winning sympathy for the realist perspective and the realist agenda from readers with other philosophical commitments. In that sense, it is a wonderfully ecumenical project.²⁶

²³ Ibid. p. 271

²⁴ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford and Cambridge MA, 1990, pp. 339-342.

²⁵ Stephen B. Wall-Smith, review of *Realism with a Human Face*, in *The Christian Century*, No. 108, May 8th, 1991, p. 531.

²⁶ Ibid.

Eric Springsted, in 'Putnam, Plato and the Task of Theology', and Peter Donovan in 'Theological Realism and the God's-Eye View' provide a more up-to-date analysis of Putnam's philosophy and its possible impact on theology.²⁷ These articles will be referred to in more detail in the appropriate sections of Chapters Two and Three.

Recently, Putnam has spent a lot of time in reflection on the nature of philosophy itself. This is very timely, as the gulf between the 'analytic' and 'continental' factions in philosophy seems to loom ever larger. Putnam's explorations on this theme are extremely readable and apposite. Mark Sacks, in a review of *Realism with a Human Face* in 1992, comments that it is "satisfying to see a philosopher who has contributed so much fine-grained work, now reflecting in an informal style (at times autobiographical) on the broader significance of the very tradition that he helped to develop."²⁸ Although having spent his philosophical life well within the 'analytic' tradition, Putnam has become very critical of the very technical, somewhat arcane route this type of philosophy has taken. As we have seen, he wants us to try and remember *why* we find philosophical problems interesting. Indeed, why are they 'problems' at all? Why do we want to philosophise? The answers to these sorts of questions must involve the

²⁷ Eric O. Springsted, 'Putnam, Plato and the Task of Theology', in *Soundings*, Vol. 73, Spring 1990, pp. 169-189; Peter Donovan, 'Theological Realism and the God's-Eye View', in *Sophia*, Vol. 33, Part 2, 1994, pp. 1-9.

²⁸ Mark Sacks, review of *Realism with a Human Face* in *Mind*, Vol. 101, No. 401, January 1992, pp. 191-194.

philosopher as ‘whole person’, for Putnam concludes that it is part of what it is like for us as humans to want to be involved in philosophical enquiry.

There is more than a hint here of the later Wittgenstein’s style and approach to philosophy. James Conant, in his introduction to Putnam’s *Realism with a Human Face*, says that “Putnam follows Wittgenstein in proposing that philosophical progress will come from a closer examination of our everyday practices of entering and adjudicating claims about what is true and what is reasonable.”²⁹ Chapter Three considers this approach to philosophical problems, especially in the light of what Putnam refers to as ‘the search for certainty’, which he identifies as another form of scepticism.

Part Two of this thesis moves on to consider a particular theological response to the issues discussed in Part One. This response is what has come to be known as ‘postliberal theology’, the clearest statement of which is found in George Lindbeck’s short book *The Nature of Doctrine*. Lindbeck, now retired, was a Lutheran theologian at Yale University whose main work and abiding concern has been ecumenism. He has been deeply involved in inter-faith and inter-denominational dialogue (notably Lutheran - Roman Catholic) for much of his working life. It is ironic then, as we shall see, that his major theological work has led to accusations of sectarianism.

²⁹ Putnam, *RHF*, p. xlix.

Although the term 'postliberal' has been used to describe a number of theologians, I will be concentrating almost exclusively on the work of Lindbeck in this thesis. The considerable influence of *The Nature of Doctrine* to some extent justifies this alone. At the beginning of 1988, *Modern Theology* devoted a whole issue to an assessment of Lindbeck's book.³⁰ Richard John Neuhaus, writing in the Lutheran journal *dialog*, says that "*The Nature of Doctrine* deserves to be called a truly seminal work."³¹ David F. Ford also calls it a "seminal work" in that it is "both the fruit of a long maturation and full of possibilities for new developments."³² David Bryant claims that postliberalism "has emerged in recent years as one of the major options for contemporary theology."³³ Bruce Marshall says that "One of the most influential and controversial proposals about the path contemporary theology should take is that of George Lindbeck."³⁴ Ronald F. Thiemann calls Lindbeck's postliberal theology a "bold and innovative proposal" and goes on to say that "it has spawned a discussion that might well help to clarify and define the major theological options available to contemporary theologians."³⁵

³⁰ *Modern Theology*, Vol. 4, No. 2, January 1988. Special Issue: George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*.

³¹ Richard John Neuhaus, 'Is there Theological Life after Liberalism? The Lindbeck Proposal' in *dialog* Vol. 24, Winter 1985, No. 1, p. 72.

³² David F. Ford, review of *TND* in *Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 37, 1986, pp. 277-282.

³³ David J. Bryant, 'Christian Identity and Historical Change: Postliberals and Historicity' in *The Journal of Religion* Vol. 73, No. 1, January 1993, p.31.

³⁴ Bruce Marshall (ed.), *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, Notre Dame, 1990, p. 1.

³⁵ Ronald F., Thiemann, 'Response to George Lindbeck', *Theology Today* Vol. XLIII, No. 3, October 1986, p. 377.

Lindbeck's theoretical and methodological emphasis, and the clear links in his book to the issues covered in Part One of this thesis, give considerable further justification for study. A final reason to consider the influence of Lindbeck's theology is something of an argument from neglect in this country. Despite the special issue of *Modern Theology*, there simply has not been the same degree of discussion of *The Nature of Doctrine* in the UK as there has been in northern America. The philosophical issues raised by the book are particularly underdeveloped. Robin Gill, in a recent book, says that theology in the UK is starting to lag behind. For example, he says "within modern theology it is difficult to see how the debate between David Tracy and George Lindbeck can be avoided - although I regret that in Britain it often is."³⁶ (Chapter Five discusses David Tracy's liberal theology and defends it against some of Lindbeck's criticisms in *The Nature of Doctrine*.)

Lindbeck's postliberalism attempts to extend Wittgenstein's notions of 'language-game' and 'forms of life' in the context of religious doctrine (both concepts are considered in detail in later chapters). One of his main reasons for pursuing this line is his ecumenism - he wishes for meaningful dialogue between different faiths and different Christian denominations without one being reducible to the other, or both being reducible to some other paradigm. To this end he measures his theory of doctrine against efficacy in ecumenical activity. Part of this approach

³⁶ Robin Gill, *Readings in Modern Theology*, London, 1995, p. 2.

pursues the Wittgensteinian exhortation to look at how a concept functions in the context of our life and language. The question to ask is 'What is Christian', i.e., to what sorts of items or activities is the word 'Christian' associated, and not 'Is Christianity true?' He sees this approach as therapeutic, dissolving the paradoxes inherent in a view of religious claims as literally true or 'expressive' of some experience.

The appeal of such a move is to undermine the claim that religion is essentially private to an individual and therefore inaccessible. It puts religion firmly in the context of community. Lindbeck says religion is "similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon."³⁷

This sort of theory is obviously the result of a particular choice of theological methodology, and also of certain contemporary influences in philosophy and sociology. William Placher says that,

... a list of the intellectual influences on postliberal theology seems something of a mish-mash: the theology of Karl Barth, Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science, analytic philosophers like Wittgenstein and Gilbert Ryle, sociologists like Peter Berger, anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, and literary theorists like Erich Auerbach.³⁸

³⁷ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 33.

³⁸ William C. Placher, 'Postliberal Theology' in *The Modern Theologians Vol. II* (ed.) David F. Ford, Oxford and Cambridge MA, 1989, p. 115.

Chapters Four and Five will consider the effect of these influences in more detail.

Another way to understand postliberal theology, the impetus behind it and its distinctive methodology, is to contrast it with other theological approaches. This is, in fact, what Lindbeck does himself in *The Nature of Doctrine*. He discusses both what he calls a 'propositionalist' type of theology and 'experiential-expressivist', and rejects them as alternative models. Here, Lindbeck is rejecting both a theology that sees religious statements as straightforward true or false propositions and a theology which holds experience as foundational. There is, says Lindbeck, no pre-linguistic experience. Our practices and experiences come from belonging to a particular culture and are shaped by that culture.

Lindbeck believes that theology has a descriptive task with regard to both practices and interpretation of (canonical) texts. Theologians must learn to speak their language well and lead by example. So, theology is not to be subsumed under some general philosophical scheme (this is despite the admitted philosophical influences behind postliberalism). Lindbeck is clear that theology is a distinctive, and potentially crucially influential, undertaking. In addition, because of the 'postmodern' loss of faith in overarching, universal strategies, postliberal theology's particularist approach should afford it a voice. William Placher believes that in the

contemporary “radically pluralistic, post-Enlightenment context, postliberalism just might provide the kind of theology best suited to join the general conversation.”³⁹

Chapter Five looks in part at the work of two theologians, Bruce Marshall and William Placher, who have continued Lindbeck’s postliberalism, and considers their responses to some of the problems which have been raised, in particular the issue of incommensurability. It also explores the alternative theological approach which is criticised by Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine*, which we have already mentioned, what he calls an ‘experiential-expressivist’ theology. The example considered in this thesis is the work of the Catholic theologian David Tracy. The suggestion will be that Lindbeck’s characterisation of experiential-expressivism is unfair to the complexity of the position held by someone like Tracy.

However, despite the criticisms which will be made of Lindbeck (specifically that his position is ultimately relativistic), Chapter Six has to consider the possibility that postliberalism may actually be a form of ‘internal realism’. This would allow Lindbeck, in fact, to avoid the perils of relativism and scepticism. However, the primary conclusion in Chapter Six is that Putnam’s internal realism is unable to provide support for Lindbeck’s postliberal position. It is, however, further concluded that Putnam’s philosophy is more reminiscent of the kind of liberal theology (opposed by Lindbeck) typified by the work of David Tracy.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 125.

The conclusions of this thesis are not, then, entirely negative. While Lindbeck's project will be judged to have failed, Putnam's arguments against dogmatism and scepticism remain to suggest a possible way forward, a way to continue the philosophical and theological conversations. It is further hoped that this thesis will bring the philosophy of Hilary Putnam to a wider theological audience. Furthermore, in finally connecting Putnam's philosophical insights with David Tracy's theology, this thesis backs the development of a distinctive, yet critical, theology. This 'theology with a human face' will not slip back into a ghetto of self-description.

PART ONE:
SOMETHING RATHER THAN NOTHING

CHAPTER ONE:

PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY AND POSTMODERNISM

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this opening chapter is primarily to set the scene for the chapters that follow. These later chapters will focus more directly on the particular metaphysical issues raised in this thesis, including questions of realism, relativism, incommensurability and scepticism. (These issues have already been introduced in a preliminary way in the previous chapter.) This chapter will give an indication of the breadth and importance of these issues and, while criticisms will be raised over certain points, the main criticisms of particular philosophical and theological positions will occur in later chapters. My intent in the present chapter is also to question the often uncritical way metaphysical concepts are appropriated. It is extremely important for theologians, if they intend to pick up an idea from philosophy or some other discipline, to realise the implications of the positions they adopt.

There is, however, a problem with the breadth and definition of the material. For example, as we will see in this chapter, a description of 'postmodernism' is extremely difficult since the word has been used, and continues to be used, very

indiscriminately. However, it is obvious that the idea that their subject matter might be considered 'postmodern' has given many theologians great encouragement. As we shall see, this is because, under this rubric, they are no longer under an obligation always to provide reasons or explanations or justifications as they would if they still had to answer to an idea of a foundational modern rationality.

In the preface to a recent book, Stanley Hauerwas says, "It is the worst of times to be a Christian theologian; it is the best of times to be a Christian theologian."¹ He says that these statements are actually both true because nobody could really care less about academic theology! He goes on to say that "Theology is a ghetto activity as insulated and uninteresting as the Saturday religion pages of the local paper."² But this lack of academic standing "creates a wonderful opportunity for those of us who [are] theologians. Since we are never going to make it as academics ... we might as well have fun."³ By this he means that theology is not under the same constraints as other disciplines (because it is not 'academic') and so it can speak its mind.

This chapter attempts to show the insidiousness of this type of position, one that says that 'anything goes' in the current intellectual climate. Of course, this is not

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular*, Durham SC and London, 1995, p. 1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

actually what Hauerwas believes. He thinks that, far from being simply ‘a bit of fun’, the serious task of Christian theology is to *change lives* (in this he takes a similar line to the ‘postliberal’ theologians we shall be looking at in Part Two of the thesis).⁴ However, given that ‘postmodernism’ is seen as giving a voice to the voiceless (even Christian theologians) and given theology’s already low standing in an academic situation still dominated so far by ‘modern’ standards of rationality, he thinks there is now a space to make the Christian theologian’s voice legitimately heard. Similarly, the British theologian Colin Gunton is clear about the potential for theology if modernity really is on the wane. This is because he believes that modernity ‘rejects the gospel’⁵ and ‘displaces God’.⁶

This chapter traces theology’s dalliance with the realism/nonrealism debate, and considers how (similarly for ‘postmodernism’) ‘nonrealism’ seems, for some theologians, to hold out hope of a path worth following. This, again, is because realists have to be forever explaining and justifying themselves. It is also seen as the path to follow if you reject modern foundationalism. We shall see, though, that it is possible to be a realist *and* a nonfoundationalist (this is Hilary Putnam’s position). Nonrealism, I suggest in this chapter and throughout the thesis, leads to relativism and scepticism.

⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

⁵ Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 1.

⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

That relativism and scepticism are not seen by many contemporary theologians as either avoidable or to be avoided is incontrovertible. For example, John Milbank, in his influential book, *Theology and Social Theory*, says that the book can “be read as an exercise in sceptical relativism”.⁷ It is *sceptical* because he is ‘demolishing’ modern social theories and it is *relativism* because he seeks to show that Christianity is as ‘justifiable’ as secular social theory, that is, neither really needs any ‘justification’. He goes on to say that his argument is intended “to overcome the pathos of modern theology, and to restore in postmodern terms, the possibility of theology as a metadiscourse.”⁸ By a metadiscourse Milbank means something that will define and incorporate all other discourses (again we shall see that this is also distinctive of George Lindbeck’s postliberalism). For Milbank, the ‘pathos of modern theology’ is in its adoption of a “false humility” which he says is a “fatal disease”. This is because “once theology surrenders its claim to be a metadiscourse, it cannot any longer articulate the word of the creator God, but is bound to turn into the oracular voice of some finite idol, such as historical scholarship, humanist psychology, or transcendental philosophy.”⁹ Like Hauerwas, Milbank is arguing for theology’s distinctive voice to be heard.

However, this chapter argues that relativism cannot provide *grounds* for anything to have a voice. Relativism is more radical than the simple fact of pluralism. It

⁷ Milbank, p. 1.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

does not just say that there are a plurality of voices, but that any voice must be considered as 'good' as any other. How, then, do we choose to hear a particular voice and why? We must be able to maintain our ordinary sense of the words 'better' or 'worse'. Hauerwas and Milbank, in fact, obviously do not believe that any point of view is as good as any other. They think that Christian theology is the *better* option. Yet their 'space' to say this is given to them by the adoption of a 'postmodern' relativism which insists that marginalised voices are as legitimate as any other. Of course, there is a (moral or political) difference between talking about 'marginal' voices rather than (as relativism must allow) *any* other voice. Nazism is marginal, but no one is rushing to offer Nazis a department in a university.¹⁰ There is also a semantic problem: if we are talking about 'marginal' voices, such talk assumes an accepted (true? powerful?) central position from which it is possible to call other positions 'marginal'.

This chapter also explores the ways in which *language* is fundamental to all these issues. My main contention will be that philosophers and theologians who may be considered 'postmodernist' or 'nonrealist', labour under a misapprehension about the nature of language. Even to say this, though, immediately presents a problem because people who could be so-categorised would, of course, deny that they were saying anything about '*the* nature' of anything. They do not interest themselves in 'essences' or 'foundations' of any sort. However, it is still fair to say that they

¹⁰ As we shall see in Chapter Three, Paul Feyerabend has taken the radical relativist line that says *any* voice is as legitimate as any other..

characterise language in certain ways, and I would like to raise some critical points about such characterisations. For example, Jean François Lyotard characterises language thus: “to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of general agonistics.”¹¹ The world of the postmoderns, incorporating a nonrealist metaphysics, is that of an extreme cultural and linguistic relativism. Language is about difference; signs only refer to other signs; different ‘language-games’ or conceptual schemes may be incommensurable. The question we are left with is whether, in this sort of postmodern world, there remains the possibility of communication at all.

Theological excursions into postmodernism are, therefore, problematic. Acceptance of an extreme relativism and the incommensurability of languages will, I suggest, leave theology in a ghetto, unable to say anything to anybody: the word will never be able to be made flesh.

¹¹ Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition, Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 10, (English translation: Bennington and Massumi), Manchester, 1986, p. 10.

1.2 Modernism and After

The terms 'modern' and 'postmodern' cover a variety of positions and views and, indeed, historical periods.¹² Delimiting the one from another in great detail is exceptionally difficult given the somewhat amorphous and contentious nature of the subject matter. It is not clear whether (or if!) we have entered a 'postmodern' age. In a recent book linking theology and postmodernism, the authors say that "Even dating the *modern* period is a risky business."¹³ Despite this, the theologian Anthony Thiselton admits that "One of the major intellectual debates of today concerns the alleged shift from the attitudes of 'modernity' to those of postmodernism."¹⁴ As we shall see in more detail in the final chapter of this thesis, the liberal Catholic theologian David Tracy thinks that the current intellectual and cultural context can be broadly considered 'postmodern' rather than 'modern'.¹⁵ However, Tracy also says that there are truths to be found in both descriptions and neither exhausts the possibilities for theology.¹⁶

¹² The term 'modernism' is used throughout this thesis in the accepted general sense and does not refer to the specific theological movement. This theological 'modernism' was an ideological movement (c. 1900) within the Catholic church which wanted to use a naturalistic evolutionary philosophy in theology, and thereby change Catholic doctrine. The movement died out after being condemned by the church authorities in 1910.

¹³ J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *truth is stranger than it used to be: [sic] Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*, London, 1995, p. 13.

¹⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise*, Edinburgh, 1994, p. 8f.

¹⁵ See, for example, David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, London, 1988, p. 78; *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, Louvain, 1990, p. 1.

¹⁶ David Tracy, 'On naming the Present' in *On the Threshold of the Third Millennium, Concilium* 1990/1, p. 71.

Some amount of illustration of the terms is obviously necessary, restricting myself largely to the theory rather than the history. In this regard, this chapter adopts a somewhat 'broad brush' approach but without, I hope, resorting to caricature. The philosopher Edith Wyschogrod says that, "Although philosophical, psychological, political, aesthetic, and culture-critical postmodernisms have been distinguished from one another, postmodernism's breaking of boundaries does not encourage easy classification."¹⁷ The late Ernest Gellner, in his witty (if somewhat polemical) book, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, encounters the same problem, defining postmodernism as "a contemporary movement ... strong and fashionable. Over and above this, it is not altogether clear what the devil it is."¹⁸

Modernism can be characterised broadly as 'the Enlightenment project'; a project based on rational, scientific principles. This is usually seen as having been ushered in by Descartes, who sought to demonstrate the existence of clear, irrefutable foundations for all areas of human knowledge. An essential human nature was postulated - the autonomous self, exhibiting individual freedom and responsibility. This view of the self coupled with the tremendous achievements of the Industrial Revolution and the speed of scientific progress since, engendered a huge sense of confidence. Middleton and Walsh say that "According to the modern world view

¹⁷ Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*, Chicago and London, 1990, p. xv.

¹⁸ Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, London, 1992, p. 22.

we know what reality is, and we know how to investigate, understand and control it.”¹⁹

The contemporary German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas has explored the nature of modernism in much detail and he takes the view that its project is, as yet, unfinished and should not be discarded (that is, we are not yet in a *postmodern* period). However, he is clear that some of the presuppositions and aims of modernism have run their course. He says,

Enlightenment thinkers ... had the extravagant expectation that the arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces but also understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings. The 20th century has shattered this optimism. ²⁰

Thiselton comments that, “Whether or not we agree with J. Habermas in doubting whether postmodernity brings ‘the end of modernity’, we cannot recover the lost innocence which characterized the self of modernity, let alone that of the pre-modern.”²¹

This loss of innocence comes from a realisation that scientific rationality has not brought us a brave new world. Rather we seem to inhabit a world teetering on the brink of nuclear and ecological disaster. In 1979, *The New York Times* covered a

¹⁹ Middleton and Walsh, p. 19f.

²⁰ Jürgen Habermas, ‘Modernity - An Incomplete Project’ in *Postmodern Culture*, (Ed.) Hal Foster London, 1985, p. 9.

²¹ Thiselton, p. 11.

symposium on 'Technology and Pessimism' held in the University of Michigan's College of Engineering. The Science and Technology Correspondent of *The Times* wrote:

... a mood of pessimism is overtaking and may have already displaced the old optimistic view of history as a steady and cumulative expansion of human power, the idea of inevitable progress born in the Scientific and Industrial Revolution and dominant in the 19th Century and for at least the first half of this century.²²

The report goes on to say that this pessimism "is fed by doubts about society's ability to rein in the seemingly runaway forces of technology, though the participants [at the Symposium] conceded that in many instances technology was more the symbol than the substance of the problem."²³

Political utopias (also the result of modern self-confidence), such as Marx envisaged, have also failed to materialise. Religious belief has been slowly marginalised and eroded by a fact-value dichotomy imposed by a scientific world view. Habermas says that secularisation and privatisation (the belief that the individual has precedence over the collective) and just the sheer *complexity* of modern life have eroded a sense of *belonging*. He believes that the Enlightenment splitting up of the areas of science, morality and art has proved crucial in the decline of modernist optimism. This is partly due to an increased emphasis on *expertise* in these areas - science, morality and the arts have drifted away from being

²² John Noble Wilford, 'Scholars Confront the Decline of Technology's Image', in *The New York Times*, November 6 1979, C1.

²³ Ibid.

part of the everyday experience of people, moved away from the heart of what he calls the 'lifeworld'. Habermas calls this a problem of 'legitimation'. He says that,

... modernization processes have been followed, as if by a shadow, by what might be called an instinct formed by reason: the awareness that, with the onesided canalization and destruction of possibilities for expression and communication in private and public spheres, changes [sic] are fading that we can bring together again, in a posttraditional everyday practice, those moments that, in traditional forms of life, once composed a unity...²⁴

Modern religious belief, where it continues in the face of widespread secularisation, is characterised as increasingly private and internal to the individual. This is something Peter Berger notes in his analysis of secularisation. He claims that modern religious belief has become just another consumer item, an expression of individual autonomy and choice. Echoing Habermas, he says that,

Such private religiosity, however 'real' it may be to the individuals who adopt it, cannot any longer fulfil the classical task of religion, that of constructing a common world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning binding on everybody.²⁵

The modern world, then, is one where existential loneliness is pervasive, and where many people have lost faith in scientific progress as well as in the supernatural God that science replaced. It is not surprising that much of what is characterised as 'postmodern' is a direct reaction against the values of the Enlightenment.

²⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol. II*, Trans: T. McCarthy, Oxford, 1987, p. 330.

²⁵ Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, Middlesex, 1973, p. 137.

However, the impetus behind postmodernism comes, like the subject itself, in a variety of forms. Firstly, without doubt part of it is some sort of emotional or political reaction against perceived ideological imperialism by Western culture. Most often this imperialism is specifically identified with capitalism, providing, as it has done, a (market) economy of oppression. It is also identified with scientific instrumentalism. This links in philosophical terms with the Enlightenment search for foundations, over-arching worldviews and general theories.

There are a few more obviously philosophical influences. For example, there is a link through continental philosophy to postmodernism, usually charted from Nietzsche. This link back to Nietzsche provides a dark, nihilistic side to postmodernism. There is also an Anglo-American 'route' through the work of philosophers like Quine, Goodman and Sellars by way of the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey. Thus, some of the impetus for postmodernism is a clear *theoretical* reaction against modernism and the hegemony of analytical philosophy in both twentieth century and Western thought.

Interestingly enough, where postmodernism can be characterised as a direct reaction against modernism, its proponents, who Habermas thinks could more accurately be called '*antimodernists*', are keen to deny this sort of characterisation. That is, they do not want to be caught playing by the modernist's rules, presenting

any kind of 'theory' or 'system'. The theologian Don Cupitt bemoans the trap postmodernists can be caught in:

... if you wish to criticise the Western idea of Reason, your criticisms will have no force unless they take the form of rational arguments - arguments rational by *its* standards, which therefore will have the effect of confirming it rather than undermining it. So you cannot win... And that being so, the best that you can do is to develop a line of dismantling commentary upon the situation as it stands.²⁶

Probably the best known impetus for postmodern thought has been through the influence of the arts and, in particular, literary criticism (this overlaps to a great degree with the 'continental route'). Emerging structural linguistic theories at the start of the century gave rise to poststructuralism, which emphasises the contingent nature of language, both in its structure and content.

Finally, Ernest Gellner ironically sees postmodernism in some guises as a continuation of *Marxist* thought, modified by the work of the 'Frankfurt School' of sociology. This is ironic because Marxism is, of course, yet another attempt at providing an overarching explanatory theory, and hence could be more obviously seen as quite typically modern. However, Gellner says that, in seeking to defend Marxism his continuators decided upon a reductive method, "the explaining-away of critical opinion in terms of class experience and interest of the critic."²⁷ This undermined the idea of 'objective' views and arguments and emphasised the subjective. The result was that a sound class or political position was to be

²⁶ Don Cupitt, *The Long-Legged Fly: A Theology of Language and Desire*, London, 1987, p. 6.

²⁷ Gellner, p. 31.

considered more important than any sort of positivism. In fact, some aspects of sociological thought are pervasive in postmodernism, in particular the emphasis on human creativity in creating social structures and world views, what Peter Berger calls “world-building”.²⁸ This includes the creation of religious world views.

Having considered some of the background to postmodernist thinking, we can ask what actually characterises such thinking. Again, there are different strands.

For example, some varieties of postmodernism set out to take the tenets of modernism to their logical extremes showing their ultimate incoherence, and hence ‘deconstruct’ modernism. People who take this line include the French literary theorist Jacques Derrida and the theologian, Mark C. Taylor.

Others attempt to be revisionary in aim. In theology, Cornel West and David Ray Griffin have taken this more constructive approach. David Ford in his postscript on Postmodernism in *The Modern Theologians*, cites the influence of Gadamer and Habermas here. He calls them “late-modernists”, and says that they “understand the present as a late stage of modernity, still involved with its critical problems, still indebted to its considerable achievements, and now challenged to go through a transformation which could bring a wiser maturity.”²⁹

²⁸ Berger, p. 13.

²⁹ David F. Ford, ‘Epilogue: Postmodernism and Postscript’ in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century Vol. II*, (ed.) David F. Ford, Oxford, 1989, p. 293.

Yet another distinctive strand is neo-pragmatism, especially prevalent in North America, influenced by both Derrida and the work of William James. This is represented by philosophy's self-styled *enfant terrible*, Richard Rorty. Rorty wants to rid philosophy of any pretensions to providing explanatory metaphysical theories. In his recent theology, Don Cupitt has picked up many of Rorty's ideas.³⁰

One common element in these different strands within postmodernism is the desire to undermine the stranglehold that scientific, instrumental realism has had on western thought and practice, showing in particular how selective our 'facts' tend to be. Western domination of the world in terms of wealth and power is seen as a result of the imposition of *our* facts over others. David Ray Griffin sees the passionate appropriation of postmodernism by some people as a direct reaction to this realisation of the destructive and totalitarian nature of our philosophical/scientific systems of thought. He says,

... each of the dominant worldviews - Augustinian and Calvinistic supernaturalism, Marxist Messianism, and secular humanism with its faith in progress, through Western capitalism, science and technology - has produced intolerant systems, each of which declares that everything else is to be sacrificed for the truth and values it declares to be alone valid.³¹

³⁰ Cupitt refers favourably to Rorty in several places. See, for example, numerous references in *The Long-Legged Fly*. In *The Time Being*, Cupitt refers to Rorty as "The ever-admirable" (London, 1992, p. 184).

³¹ David Ray Griffin, 'Postmodern Theology and A/theology: A Response to Mark C. Taylor' in *Varieties of Postmodern Theology*, (eds.) Griffin, Beardslee and Holland, New York, 1989, p. 39.

However, the question has to be raised whether the systems based on 'modern' values are *necessarily* intolerant. It seems clear that a flawed system is not necessarily (i.e., logically) founded on flawed principles. Surely the theory - in this case the 'Enlightenment project' - could be sound but the outworking of it not? This question has not been sufficiently well addressed by critics of modernity. Even the claim that these sort of values will always *tend* towards oppressive and intolerant systems seems unproven. However, this defence has been questioned by Hilary Putnam on straightforwardly historical and empirical grounds. He points out that our repeated failure throughout modern history to live up to the ideals of the Enlightenment suggests that there is something seriously amiss with them.³²

It also remains true to say that if facts can be chosen *to any degree* to suit the purposes of the people with power, then 'reality' as a single undifferentiated concept is undermined. In effect, then, we *can* choose or shape reality. It is not a 'given'.

In some ways this could be nothing more than a reiteration of Kant's insights in the political realm. That is, the world (as thing-in-itself) is unknowable; we only have our perception of the world; and that perception consists in the application of certain categories of thought. However, it does actually say something more than

³² Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life*, Cambridge MA and London, 1994, p. 184.

Kant. Our perceptions are not just the outcome of certain categories of thought, but are *choices* of belief, which then masquerade as facts. We can, and do, choose ideology and represent it as Truth.

Anthony Thiselton cites the influence of Nietzsche and Foucault here, with their consistent identification of truth with power. He goes on to say that,

Christian theology ... cannot be said to be compatible with the transvaluation of questions about truth into questions about value or power as an ultimate principle. But it entirely coheres with Christian theology to accept that this transvaluation *frequently takes place* where self interest still holds sway even among otherwise sincere believers. There remains much to learn in this respect from Barthes, Foucault and Derrida.³³

1.3 The Reality of the Matter

For some, then, it looks like nonrealism is a form of political correctness (Rorty often seems like this). Getting rid of 'facts' about the world is a repudiation of imperialism. If reality is in some way created I cannot impose my view of the world on you because I can't say what *the* world is. No *system* or *theory* can therefore give a complete picture of reality. The reason a complete picture is unavailable is because there is no neutral vantage point, no 'God's Eye View', to provide such a picture. It is almost a late twentieth century truism that

³³ Thiselton., p. 14.

observation is 'theory-laden'. Thus the Enlightenment desire to provide general, universal, indubitable principles is shown to be, at best, hopelessly naïve and, at worst, a sham hiding a very suspect hidden agenda.

We then seem to have only a tenuous grip on 'reality'. If our ideas (or ideology) form reality, where is the real world behind those ideas? Nonrealism is simply a position which says that there is no 'real' (or, anyway *more* real) world corresponding to our perception of it. For any declarative sentence, there is no 'matter of fact' that will make it true or false. Instead of 'truth' we have the concepts of 'justifiable', 'warranted' or 'coherent'. We ask, 'What is it appropriate to say?' rather than, 'What is true?'.

To some degree, then, nonrealism may be just old fashioned philosophical idealism, a few centuries but not a million miles away from Berkeley (but without Berkeley's God of course). The twentieth century difference is that, as Rorty amongst others points out, a screen of words, between us and the world they describe, has replaced the eighteenth century screen of 'ideas'. So the epistemological problem of how ideas in our head connect with the world becomes, 'How does *language* hook on to the world?', and the sceptical position becomes 'How do we *know* that our words hook onto the world *correctly*?'.

So, we can start to see why *language* is so important for all these issues. For postmodernists, reality is what we *call* reality. The world is as we say it is. Truth

is in the eye of the beholder or, more precisely, the words of the speaker. And there is a plurality of different voices. Don Cupitt endorses the nonrealist view: "The surface play of phenomena - words, signs, meanings, appearances - *is* reality. Why seek to downgrade it? The fatal illusion is to believe that we can pierce the veil and find more-real and unchanging verities behind it."³⁴

Likewise, Richard Rorty defines nonrealism as the claim that "no linguistic item represents any non-linguistic item."³⁵ Just as Bishop Berkeley only had his ideas, now we only have our words. Not, of course, that Rorty, like Cupitt, believes there is any concept of us 'only' having ideas or words. What more *can* we have, he asks, and why should we want more?

There are a couple of things to tease out in Rorty's definition, though, two issues that can be distinguished. Firstly, there is the notion of representation, and, secondly, the question of whether there are any non-linguistic items.

Rorty does not isolate these two strands and as a result does not explain what the second might amount to. I think it is true to say that his main desire is to get away totally from *representations*. This is why he rejects traditional philosophical epistemology - he cannot imagine what epistemology would be like without the notion of representing. Alan Malachowski criticises Rorty specifically for

³⁴ Cupitt, *The Long-Legged Fly*, p. 20.

³⁵ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge, 1991, p. 2.

recommending the wholesale junking of epistemology as a philosophical discipline. Malachowski maintains that such a junking is neither desirable nor possible. Rorty, he believes, conflates the issues of foundationalism and epistemology. Much of traditional theory of knowledge in philosophy has been foundational in nature. But it need not be so. He also does not find Rorty's picture of a post-epistemological future persuasive and, furthermore, he does not really believe that Rorty practices what he preaches. He says,

... in advocating a radical shift away from epistemology, Rorty can be seen to be subscribing to a distinct set of views on the nature, and value, of that area of philosophical endeavour and the problems it typically confronts... And, it is in this sense of presenting grounds for changing our view of the subject (rather than simply 'changing the subject') that Rorty can be interpreted as holding a substantive position.³⁶

Malachowski claims that Rorty is simply arguing for a different type of epistemology, rather than being able to dispense with it completely.

Postmodernism, however, rejects foundations of any sort, as we might expect with its undermining of the notions of 'reality' and 'truth'. There are no universal truths, only contingent truths. Theories only exist along pragmatic lines. If a theory continues to work and, as Rorty puts it, helps us 'cope' with reality, then we continue to hang on to that theory. We will reject it if it stops working, or

³⁶ Alan Malachowski, 'Deep Epistemology without Foundations (in Language)' in *Reading Rorty*, (ed.) Malachowski, Oxford, 1990, p. 143.

another theory seems to work better.³⁷ There is nothing *underpinning* our words about the world.

The Enlightenment project to discover 'essential' truths had presented distinctive theological problems. If theology, as must have been readily apparent, cannot attain the dizzy heights of scientific, rational knowledge then what can provide its foundation? What could act as an axiom for theology? An answer which was suggested was Revelation. This was brought in to provide *a priori* truth in religion, a foundation for faith. Unfortunately this sort of foundation was antithetical to the foundations of the Enlightenment sort; it had absolutely nothing to do with scientific method. Ernest Gellner notes this. He says,

The precise details of scientific method, of the cognitive procedure discovered in the course of the Scientific Revolution and codified by the Enlightenment, continue to be contentious. But in rough outline, it is possible to specify them: there are no privileged or *a priori* substantive truths. (This, at one fell swoop, eliminates the sacred from the world.) There are no privileged Sources or Affirmations, and all of them can be queried.³⁸

So, a traditional theology had already been undermined by modernism. Science has squeezed God out of the universe. 'The Heavens' have been well and truly deconstructed already.

³⁷ Similarly, Jacques Derrida's post-structuralist interpretation erodes the distinction between word and fact, between 'text' and truth. Reference, he says, "complicates the boundary line that ought to run between the text and what seems to lie beyond its fringes, what is classed as the *real*." Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, Chicago, 1981, p. 41f.

³⁸ Gellner, p. 80.

However, even if theology cannot provide a foundation suitable in modern terms, a *nonfoundationalist* position, according to some theologians, can be adopted. John Thiel says that such a position is critical of “the epistemological assumption that there are ‘foundations’ for knowledge, noninferential principles whose certainty and stability ground other epistemic claims.”³⁹ Referring to *The Nature of Doctrine*, Thiel cites George Lindbeck as a case in point of a nonfoundationalist theologian, especially in light of Lindbeck’s rejection (which we shall see more of in Chapters Four and Five) of a position which he calls ‘experiential-expressivist’, which has religious experience as its foundation. Thiel says, “George Lindbeck’s call for a nonfoundational approach to theology ... addresses what he judges to be the unhappy fate of Christianity in the modern age.”⁴⁰ He goes on to say,

Lindbeck is convinced that the ethos, values, and directions of modernity have subsumed those of the Christian tradition and through that subsumption Christianity in the modern world is threatened with the loss of its identity. Lindbeck understands the modern or liberal tradition that has had such deleterious effects on Christianity to extend from the age of the Enlightenment to the present. Only now ... can the church fully recognize the consequences of modernity for its belief and practice, and mark a critical position from which to distinguish its own agenda from that of modernity.⁴¹

Don Cupitt is clear that theology must go down a nonfoundational, nonrealist path, however painful it might be to give up on our comfortable modernist ideas of objectivity or certainty. He says,

³⁹ John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism*, Minneapolis, 1994, p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51f.

Do not tell me that this complete loss of objectivity is hard, for nobody knows that better than I do. It is hardest of all to give up the last shivers and shreds of objectivity, only by doing so can faith finally free itself from all that is outworn and become as fully voluntary, creative and courageous as it is required to be today.⁴²

However, can there really be a postmodern *theology*, especially if it incorporates nonrealist metaphysics? David Ford says he understands “the welcome given to postmodernity's undermining of types of rationality and historical authority that have often attempted to dictate to theology”, and he himself welcomes the emphasis on particular rather than universal principles. Theology is then “free to engage deeply with the specificity of Christianity in its narratives, social forms, behaviour, and affirmations of faith.”⁴³ This positive aspect which is obviously potentially extremely liberating for theologians, is something expressed in great detail, with reference to the language and expression of faith, by Lindbeck. Christianity gets to *exhibit* its own distinctive nature. For example, Lindbeck says, “The proclamation of the gospel, as a Christian would put it, may be first of all the telling of the story, but this gains power and meaning insofar as it is embodied in the total gestalt of community life and action.”⁴⁴

Yet what is the ‘specificity’ of Christianity, as Ford describes it, if nonrealism is the dominant metaphysics? Surely it is part of the nature of theological discourse that much of it claims to be *substantive*. There is more to religious doctrine (from

⁴² Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, London, 1984, p. 190.

⁴³ Ford, ‘Epilogue’, p. 294.

⁴⁴ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 36.

the point of view of the believer at the very least) than the part it plays in creating, and being the expression of, a community. Some appreciation of the fact that the believer is often making specific truth claims must be given. While Lindbeck goes some way down the path of claiming that what is important is simply the shifting surface of our activity (words and deeds), he hangs on to what he calls a “modest cognitivism”, which I take to mean some form of correspondence theory of truth, and hence (a modest) realism.⁴⁵

It cannot be ignored, though, that there are severe difficulties involved in talking about the ‘substantive’ nature of religious discourse. Are we required to say that a believer is always making specific *ontological* claims?

There is a suspicion, though, that the difficulty over the ontological status of religious language can, on occasion, act as a red herring. While it is clear that in some instances factual claims are being made, this is not always the case. In addition, a fact, if it is unearthed or considered more likely to be the case than not, does not necessarily imply an ontology (although it may do). Historical claims will also be made by the religious believer, and in this case religious historical claims should be treated in the same manner as any other sort of historical claim. Scepticism (or indifference) over the ontological status of religious claims does not

⁴⁵ Ibid.

automatically suggest nonrealism. (A lot of fuss here suggests a rather narrow view of what language actually *does*.)

Both Mark C. Taylor and Don Cupitt are, however, examples of theologians who embrace a thoroughgoing nonrealism. Taylor expresses the typical postmodern insight, in typical postmodern manner. He says "there is no 'Archimedean point' to provide access to a nonfigural world that can function as the critical norm with which to judge conflicting interpretations. Experience is never raw; it is always cooked in a figural code."⁴⁶ That is, nothing is basic and we could never escape from our language to describe it neutrally anyway.

Cupitt can often be seen as something of a philosophical magpie, spending his time picking up bits and pieces from here and there, attracted to whatever is currently shining most brightly. He thus exhibits ideas taken from many of the strands we identified earlier. He takes much from Rorty and the American neo-pragmatists and also much from deconstructionism and Derrida. This latter influence can provide some explanation as to why Cupitt is often accused of nihilism in his theology. As we have noted, the 'continental route' to postmodernism, culminating in Derrida's work, is the road with Nietzsche's philosophy as its starting point. Cupitt explains himself by claiming that he is simply within a long tradition of 'negative theology'. (Some influence from

⁴⁶ Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, Chicago, 1984, p. 172.

Eastern thought and religion is also apparent here, where Cupitt talks about the experience of 'the Nihil'.)

However, Cupitt's nonrealism, where it can be seen as a repudiation of realism, often seems to have something of a false target. Rowan Williams picks up on this and criticises Cupitt for his unfavourable portrayal of realism in theology:

If 'realism' is exactly what Cupitt suggests it is, a good many traditional theologians might find themselves uneasy with it. I don't think that anything [I (Williams) have written], for instance, would commit me to a belief that all theological statements accurately depict some states of affairs in another world, that God can be established as an 'objective' entity by neutral enquiry, that morality and spirituality are calculated to earn everlasting repayment, or even that 'eternal life' primarily designates an infinitely prolonged post-mortem experience. 'Realism' in this sense is an Aunt Sally.⁴⁷

Philosophy and theology, seen as purveyors of overarching theories, foundations and grounds of knowledge, are specifically attacked by Cupitt. As part of his 'deconstructive' method, he points out that the abstract concepts beloved by philosophy are "all of them, merely worn-down metaphors."⁴⁸ There is no privileged position for philosophy. He concludes that "The world, knowledge and the human condition do not *have to* be constituted in any particular way, however basic."⁴⁹ We can have no theories of reality or the self, and there are no 'grounds' of knowledge.

⁴⁷ Rowan Williams, "Religious Realism": On Not Quite Agreeing with Don Cupitt' in *Modern Theology*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1984, p.18. A reply by Cupitt to William's article is included in the same volume.

⁴⁸ Cupitt, *The Long-Legged Fly*, p. 28.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.29

But what is the difference between this and old-fashioned philosophical scepticism? These are exactly the conclusions of the sceptical position. And if this is the case, the claims to have dismissed epistemology from the philosophical scene ring hollow. For epistemology is where scepticism has its life and being.

Mark C. Taylor has been criticised on precisely this question. For example, Murphy and McClendon conclude that, while at first glance Taylor may seem a paradigm case of a postmodern theologian, he should perhaps be better described as “arch-modern”.⁵⁰ They cite his ‘atomist’ portrayal of the self, already present in Hume’s ‘bundle theory’ of personal identity; they say, with regard to language, that Taylor “in effect agrees with other moderns in assuming that without reference there is no fixed meaning”; and that, finally, Taylor’s “skeptical conclusion ... drawn from the insupportability of a correspondence theory of truth ... is simply and typically modern.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ Nancy Murphy and James William McClendon Jr., ‘Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies’ in *Modern Theology* Vol. 5, No. 3, April 1989, p. 211ff.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

1.4 Theories of Relativity

Relativism and resultant scepticism is something Ernest Gellner takes very seriously. He says, "Postmodernism as such doesn't matter too much. It is a fad which owes its appeal to its seeming novelty and genuine obscurity, and it will pass soon enough, as such fashions do. But it is a specimen of relativism, and relativism does matter."⁵²

As we have seen, relativism is a position that says that since there is no one, overarching neutral language with which to describe our world, there are only a multitude of different languages, many different points of view. Any attempt at finding a 'God's Eye View' is futile. So, the sceptical difficulty with relativism is that, since I only have my point of view (formed by the society in which I live and its history), how can I understand another point of view? From the vantage point of my culture, how do I hope to understand any other culture? From within my language, how do I know what a speaker of another language is saying?

Gellner criticises relativism on the grounds that it misrepresents how we actually view other cultures. His concern is obviously that of a sociologist and social anthropologist: relativism will stop us being able to describe other cultures. Such description will be considered impossible because of the difficulty of

⁵² Gellner, p. 71.

understanding different cultures, and the theory-ladenness of observation sentences. Increasingly too, it will not be 'politically correct' to try and describe other cultures: the very attempt at neutral theorising is suspect. Every description will be seen as an implicit *comparison* because of the cultural 'baggage' we carry around with us. Gellner says relativism here is destructive. He claims that it "obscures tremendous differences in cognition and technical power, differences which are crucial for the understanding of current developments of human society."⁵³ Comparisons become impossible, and we lose a sense of progress.

An obvious response, especially if the problem is construed in linguistic terms, is the possibility of *translation*. We are all very familiar with the notion and practice of translating terms from one language into another. However, it is not as easy as it may seem. Concepts contained in a language could be so radically different (due to different cultures, histories, etc.) that they may, in practice, not be translatable. Additionally, there may not be a third, neutral language to 'broker' a translation. These languages are said to be incommensurable. Chapter Three considers this notion of incommensurability in detail, and it is discussed again in detail in Chapter Five in the light of its use within postliberal theology.

The issue of translation is a complex one. The idea that, in translating, we are matching simple (atomistic) items of meaning is an appealing one. It is an idea,

⁵³ Ibid.

though, which has been largely undermined by Quine's philosophy of language, specifically his view about the indeterminacy of translation which first appeared in *Word and Object* (1960). That is, he argued, the meaning of an individual sentence could always be looked at as being able to be interpreted in potentially many different ways. The evidence for a particular scheme of translation could always be interpreted in a way which could favour a different scheme of translation. Quine claims that meaning is a concept that can only make sense at a holistic level. The result is that ontologies are not isomorphic and that meanings are not mental objects (a conclusion that Wittgenstein had come to some time before). Hilary Putnam sees Quine's lasting influence as being his insistence that "the notion of 'sameness of meaning' that we actually possess is constituted by our actual practice of translation and interpretation; meanings are not to be seen as Platonic objects which somehow *explain* translation and interpretation."⁵⁴

The slippery nature of language is constantly emphasised by postmodern, 'deconstructivist' thinkers. For them, signs only refer to other signs, but there is a slippage. Taylor says that "meaning is unavoidably equivocal."⁵⁵ That is why, like Lyotard who we quoted earlier, they characterise language as a *fight* for meaning, or as simply *playing* with words.

⁵⁴ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 275.

⁵⁵ Taylor, p. 173.

The issue of incommensurability poses immediate problems for theology. Practically, those involved in ecumenical activity (a concern of Lindbeck's) seem to be stopped in their tracks. How *can* one religious tradition talk to another and hope to understand? A separate question is how we are to talk of God? We are 'earthed' where we are - how do we express in our human language that which transcends the human, that which is *unearthly*? How do our words capture The Word?

A way out for theology has been recourse to experience, phenomenology. Ecumenical activity, for instance, can go on because underneath the different cultures, the different words and rituals, lies the *same* religious experience. We can talk of God because our experience of him allows us to, i.e., through his grace and revelation. This is the position we shall see characterised by George Lindbeck as 'experiential-expressivism'.

The main problem for this approach is the assumption that experience is pre-linguistic or non-linguistic. This is difficult to defend. Surely it is the case that we have no access, even to our own experience, except through language. It is our medium for understanding. Even if there is basic, pre-linguistic experience, language is still our means of dealing with it.

Another attempt to cope with the problem of relativism is simply to accept it. Religious language on this view makes sense within the religious conceptual



scheme or culture. This is where people have appropriated Wittgenstein's notion of a 'language-game'. Language-games have their own rules (grammar) and vocabulary, and they are internally consistent. That is, they create their own conditions of meaning. A language-game is something that you take part in by assimilating or learning its rules.

An interesting quote from Albert Camus expresses some of this way of looking at things. He says "Since I do not feel that I have any absolute truth or any message, I shall never abandon the principle that Christian truth is an illusion, but only inasmuch as I have found it impossible to enter."⁵⁶ Presumably if he *had* been able to "enter" into Christian truth, he would, by definition no longer find it illusory.

But is internal consistency enough? As this chapter has already suggested, a Christian believer for example, will often see himself or herself as making truth claims, which they will see as having a truth not *just for that game*. Whether or not this belief is correct, an analysis of the language must reflect this.

Also we may still be left with our sceptical problem. If we want to communicate between language-games, as it were, how do we know we are communicating *successfully*? If other cultures are radically separated, different 'games', how then

⁵⁶ Albert Camus, Lecture to the Latour-Maubourg Dominicans, Paris, 1946.

can we understand them? (There is an obvious parallel here with the so-called 'other minds' problem in philosophy.)

Fergus Kerr refers to the theological use of Wittgenstein's concept of a 'language-game', and concludes that its use is a sort of fideism. That is (as with the example of Camus above), "unless you have the faith you cannot take part in a rational discussion of the Christian religion."⁵⁷ However, as we shall see later where we look at what Putnam has to say about Wittgenstein's account of religious belief, nothing in Wittgenstein's own texts would support the identification of a religion as a language-game. Kerr points this out, saying that apart from anything else, all Wittgenstein's examples of 'language-games' or a 'form of life' are small scale.⁵⁸ This misreading of Wittgenstein has been perpetuated by both Don Cupitt and by Richard Rorty. Thiselton comments that Rorty interprets Wittgenstein "in a radically pluralized and functional way."⁵⁹ Although, Thiselton correctly goes on to say that we should be fair to Rorty in that he "rightly criticises the reading of Wittgenstein adopted by Lyotard, which is even more radically relativistic."⁶⁰

Relativism leads us back into sceptical difficulties. That there are breakdowns in communication and what D. Z. Phillips refers to as 'distances' between individual people and larger cultural groups, is incontestable. Hilary Putnam also talks about

⁵⁷ Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, Oxford, 1986, p. 28.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (eds.) G. E. M. Anscombe, Rush Rhees and G. H. von Wright, Oxford, 1978, 23.

⁵⁹ Thiselton, p. 33.

⁶⁰ Ibid. See, for example, Lyotard, p. 40f.

“the possibility of making oneself conscious of other modes of human fulfilment and the terrible difficulty of doing this.”⁶¹ But we should not (and in fact, *do not*) act as if these breakdowns and difficulties were the norm. George Steiner believes that, while breakdowns in translation from one language to another clearly happen, this should not make us sceptical about the possibility of translation *per se*. He says, “The argument against translatability is ... often no more than an argument based on local, temporary myopia.”⁶² He goes on to say that we “*do* speak of the world and to one another. We *do* translate intra- and interlingually and have done so since the beginning of human history. The defence of translation has the immense advantage of abundant, vulgar fact.”⁶³ However, Steiner admits that there is no *theory* of translation possible (and no *theory* of meaning).⁶⁴

At the same time, it would be crass to suggest that all difficulties can be explained away. D. Z. Phillips takes up this point:

Scepticism is often occasioned by serious differences between human beings. Some philosophers have argued that its challenge can only be met by showing that these differences are only apparent, not real. I argue ... that the challenge can be met without denying them. To deny the differences and distances is to deny our common experience.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Putnam, *W&L*, p. 186.

⁶² George Steiner, *After Babel*, Oxford, 1992 (second edition), p. 263.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

⁶⁵ D. Z. Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy: The Challenge of Scepticism*, Oxford and Cambridge MA, 1996, p. xif.

This point is very important. The rush of certain theologians to take up relativistic positions, positions which suggest religion may be some sort of incommensurable language-game, obscures *both* what they are trying to emphasise - the distinctiveness of a particular language or community - *and* the very many 'languages' we have in common as human beings.

Serious differences between people will remain. Phillips, for example, says it is a facile romanticism that will deny this.⁶⁶ He says, "What we have to show is how the sceptics' words fail to do justice to [our] forms of life."⁶⁷

It is obvious, though, that relativism does capture some vital insights. That facts are not able to be simply 'read off' from the world and that we, to a greater or lesser extent, create them; that ideas and concepts have histories and geographical boundaries; that truth and experience are, to some degree, a product of our culture - these are important. And not only does relativism provide these important insights, but they have already been taken on board to a large degree in our everyday understanding of the world, and are in fact inescapable. The difficulty is, like 'postmodernism', 'relativism' is an amorphous term which can cover many different views.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

An extreme relativism - and it seems to me that Don Cupitt and Mark C. Taylor stray this far - must be self-refuting and ultimately incoherent. Cupitt fudges the issue by talking about 'paradoxes' which appear when he tries to explicate his view, but it is hard to see them as anything but the paradoxes of an incoherent argument. The problem is that if everything is relative, this must include the relativist's own position (i.e., that everything is relative), and thus the position is self-refuting. Gellner expresses the relativist's problem slightly differently, though in a typically forthright manner : "The relativist endorses the absolutism of others, and so his relativism entails an absolutism which also contradicts it. Let us leave him with that problem: there is no way out of it."⁶⁸ I think that this is the problem Cupitt and Taylor are left with.

However, very few people actually admit to holding a position of extreme relativism, a fact which Hilary Putnam points out. He says, "that (total) relativism is inconsistent is a truism among philosophers. After all, is it not *obviously* contradictory to *hold* a point of view while at the same time holding that *no* point of view is more justified or right than any other."⁶⁹ While this is surely the case, it does not stop some pronouncements that clearly have this sort of incoherence at their core. Thus Gellner is justified in reminding us of the knock-down argument against relativism. The problem is to retain the positive insights of relativism without actually holding an out-and-out relativist position.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 74.

⁶⁹ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge, 1981, p. 119.

Thus, in theology, both Lindbeck and Runzo have attempted to form a *modified* relativist position. Runzo says that “accepting theological relativism does not preclude the possibility of testing the reasonableness of monotheistic belief” and that scepticism is not a necessary result of this kind of moderated relativism.⁷⁰ Lindbeck says that his theory of ‘intratextuality’ in theology (which we shall look at in Chapter Four) could be thought to be “wholly relativistic”, and that his postliberal theology in general can lead to accusations of fideism.⁷¹ But Lindbeck believes that his approach, which allows religions to maintain their distinctiveness, helps matters since participants in a conversation may communicate better if they have a good idea of who they are and what they stand for. (Again, we shall consider these matters as they pertain to Lindbeck in more detail in Chapters Four and Five.)

While Cupitt and Taylor seem almost to revel in the paradoxes of extreme relativism (as part, no doubt, of the deconstructive process), it is hard to see where it gets them. Cupitt has the believing self sitting in conceptual darkness, only being able to see the world from *his* point of view making moral and aesthetic decisions in isolation. It is hard to see what stops his decisions from being entirely arbitrary.⁷² In addition, Rowan Williams points out against Cupitt that this view

⁷⁰ Joseph Runzo, *Reason, Relativism and God*, Basingstoke, 1986, p. 286.

⁷¹ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 128.

⁷² Fergus Kerr also makes this point in *Theology After Wittgenstein*, p.17.

of the lonely moral self also undermines the notion we have of moral empathy.⁷³ (We shall see later that the importance of an empathetic understanding is something much emphasised by Hilary Putnam.)

Iris Murdoch believes Cupitt occupies a “ruthlessly radical position” in theology.⁷⁴ She says, “Cupitt uses the term ‘expressive’ to characterise ‘religious language’. Modern man cannot accept the old religious story as literally descriptive. Nor can he retain the myths as being ‘somehow’ vehicles of truth.”⁷⁵ Murdoch admires much of Cupitt’s work but thinks his ultimate position is “unnecessarily extreme”.⁷⁶ She says,

The words ‘subjectivist’, ‘expressivist’, ‘non-cognitive’ suggest ... a surrender [of spirituality], and a picture of religion as a matter of private (existentialist) choice. The idea of choosing the spiritual or religious as (an item among others) better, seems oddly abstract.⁷⁷

Runzo, with his modified relativism, makes it clear that we are not talking about subjectivism (nor, indeed, solipsism). He claims that it turns out that “any relativist epistemology which holds or entails that truth is relative to conceptual schemas will always in fact amount to the view that truth is societally relative, and not solely individualistic.”⁷⁸

⁷³ Williams, p. 6.

⁷⁴ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, London, 1993, p. 452.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 454.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Runzo, p. 49.

However, are we really any better off with this widened domain? This appeal to the superiority of intersubjective agreement does not necessarily solve the problem. For an *intersubjectivity* is still a subjectivity, albeit a bigger one. There is the additional problem too that we have to choose and set out the boundaries of the domain in question.

Runzo's view is much the same one we saw earlier with the notion of 'language-games'. He tries to avoid the associated difficulty with this view, that of the relation between internal consistency (truth relative to a language-game or conceptual scheme) and external relevance. As we have seen, a believer within the religious 'game' claims a substance and generality for some of his beliefs which is hard to capture within this view. Runzo tries to provide for this by saying that there is an absolute character to the believer's commitment. He says,

For the person of mature monotheistic faith, there will be respected alternative faiths, but there can be no alternative commitment. This is why the most fundamental truth-claims inherent in the world-view of the person who has faith in God become personal-absolute truths.⁷⁹

Believing that your faith is best, says Runzo, is not saying that only your faith is the right one. Truth remains relative, while our commitment is absolute.

However, it is still not clear how a description and understanding of other people's beliefs may be possible. The relativism is not modified quite enough. Truths are

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 264.

still truths *for me*, and as such it is not obvious how others can enter into the conversation. Certainly someone could *convert* to my belief-system, but they could not *converse* about it.⁸⁰ Correspondingly, it is not clear (and this is a crucial question) how *criticism* of a belief-system, including one's own, would be possible.

David Griffin picks up this question in his appraisal of Mark Taylor's 'a/theology', and the presentation of his own 'revisionary' postmodernism. According to Griffin, there do exist some universal facts, common to all human experience. These he calls "hard-core commonsense notions" which are such that they "*cannot be denied without contradicting one's own practice*."⁸¹ One example he gives is that of someone trying to persuade someone else that there is no such thing as causal influence or purposeful action. Many of the common sense notions are unconscious; we abide by them without noticing. This is similar to Donald Davidson's claim that we have certain basic, even quite banal, beliefs in common, and this would mean that languages cannot be incommensurable.⁸²

Griffin's work, like Davidson, is an attempt to break away from cultural relativism, incommensurability and the spectre of scepticism. Beliefs about the world become accessible, able to be talked about (not just 'played' with), criticised, justified, modified and abandoned when necessary. It is an attempt to return us to

⁸⁰ I am indebted to Jim Francis for the comparison of conversation and conversion (conversion being conversation with a *telos*).

⁸¹ Griffin, p. 35.

⁸² Davidson discusses this most fully in 'On the very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford, 1984, Chapter 13.

our ordinary world and words. These can be problematic, but we must not overestimate the difficulties. Iris Murdoch says, "Theological crisis no doubt poses linguistic problems. (Does the word 'God' mean something different now, should we go on using it?)" She continues,

But these problems can be dealt with by all the vast resources of our ordinary reflective procedures and our ordinary metaphorical evaluative language. We are not cut off from St. Paul. A division of language itself between fact and value not only isolates and diminishes value, it may damage the concept of truth. (As it is damaged by Derrida.) The picture of religion as a 'cluster of values' suggests a corner, a place among places, a thing among things. We have not been driven out of a brightly coloured mythical world which now belongs to a false illusioned past, leaving us with many facts, an imageless striving will and an expressive language. We still live in the old familiar world and explain and clarify and celebrate it in the old endlessly fertile and inventive modes of speech.⁸³

As we shall see in the following chapters concerning the philosophy of Hilary Putnam, he also (like Murdoch) attempts to dissolve a strict fact/value dichotomy and wishes to return us to ordinary uses of certain words which have become philosophically (and theologically) problematic.

⁸³ Murdoch, p. 454f.

CHAPTER TWO:

HILARY PUTNAM'S INTERNAL REALISM

2.1 Introduction

As we have seen in the Introduction to this thesis, Hilary Putnam has been one of the key players in recent Anglo-American philosophy. He has published work in a wide number of subjects (specialising initially in the philosophy of science and mathematics) which includes significant work in the areas and issues which this thesis focuses on, and which have been introduced in Chapter One. These issues are: realism and nonrealism, relativism, and the incommensurability of languages.

This chapter focuses on Putnam's criticisms of metaphysical realism, and considers his own alternative picture of 'internal realism'. Putnam's modifications and changes in emphasis to this picture will be acknowledged as his position has developed over the years. For instance, Putnam himself is now unhappy with the term 'internal realism'. He says he wishes he had called it '*pragmatic*' realism¹ and has subsequently also characterised it as 'realism with a human face' or 'realism with a small 'r''. Most recently, in his Dewey Lectures (1994), he refers to both

¹ See, for example, Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism*, LaSalle, IL. 1987, p. 17, although he mentions this in several places.

'natural' realism and 'common-sense' realism.² He thinks these appellations are more useful in distinguishing his position from metaphysical realism while avoiding the possible deconstructivist interpretations that the word 'internal' could suggest.

We have already noted in the Introduction Putnam's openness about the development of his philosophy, including the amending and discarding of previously held views, and also of the influence of those whom we have seen Conant refers to as Putnam's 'philosophical heroes'. Again, Putnam is quite frank about the influence of certain key thinkers on his own work, and he is very keen to place his own work within the context of that of other philosophers - most notably for Putnam, Kant, the American pragmatists (especially William James) and Wittgenstein. Conant says that "at any given point in [Putnam's] career, one has only to glance at the current membership of this constellation to ascertain the general philosophical direction in which he is (often quite rapidly) moving."³

Putnam likes to look at contemporary philosophical problems in this sort of historical context, as part of a history of ideas, because he thinks that philosophy is, finally and essentially, part of our experience as human beings. As such we will continue to ask the sorts of questions we have always asked. He is disdainful of

² Hilary Putnam, 'Sense, Nonsense and the Senses: An Inquiry into the Powers of the Human Mind', *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XCI, No. 9, September 1994, p. 489.

³ James Conant in the Introduction to *RHF*, p. xvii. Amongst contemporary philosophers, Putnam's heroes clearly include Stanley Cavell and John McDowell.

attempts to redefine the subject matter of philosophy in any radical sort of way (as Richard Rorty clearly favours). He says that “a simple induction from the history of thought suggests that metaphysical discussion is not going to disappear as long as reflective people remain in the world.”⁴

In the final section of this chapter I will look at Putnam’s running battle with Richard Rorty, whose views we considered briefly in the last chapter. Rorty objects most strongly to Putnam’s criticisms that Rorty’s philosophical views amount to relativism, and in fact, thinks that Putnam’s substantive position is not so dissimilar from his own. If Rorty is correct in his claim that there is less of a difference between their philosophical views than Putnam supposes, does Putnam have to accede (as he believes Rorty must) to the charge of relativism? Putnam has an ethical impetus in driving a wedge between his views and the relativist position; he thinks moral relativity would be a disaster, as it leads inevitably to moral scepticism. Then, he says, “It is an open question whether an enlightened society can avoid a corrosive moral scepticism without tumbling back into moral authoritarianism.”⁵ It is Putnam’s desire to show that both scepticism and authoritarianism can be avoided.

⁴ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 19. This is not to suggest that there can be no *new* philosophical issues. Obviously new questions will arise, questions which could not have been considered prior to our present day (for example questions arising from the nature of quantum physics). However, there are degrees of generality in philosophical questions. For instance, in ethics, we can now debate the implications of *in vitro* fertilisation; yet the general ethical question ‘How should we live?’ is still the one being answered. (Similarly in metaphysics, a comparable question might be ‘What is the nature of reality?’)

⁵ Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question*, Cambridge MA. and Oxford, 1995, p. 2.

2.2 The Critique of Metaphysical Realism

An early definition of what Putnam calls 'metaphysical realism' or 'scientific realism' appears in *Reason, Truth and History*. It is that:

... the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'. Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things.⁶

He refers to this sort of view as the 'externalist' view "because its favourite point of view is a God's Eye point of view".⁷ As we saw in Chapter One, this is an attempt to provide a neutral description of the world, as if 'from the outside'. Putnam has developed his own 'internal' realism (in all its different incarnations) as a response to the failures of the externalist view. We shall look at Putnam's formulation of internal realism in detail in the next section. It is important in the first place to understand the criticisms Putnam levels against externalism, or as he also refers to this position, 'metaphysical realism'.

Putnam presents many, often technical, arguments against metaphysical realism. However, his attack is largely on two connected fronts. Firstly, he claims that metaphysical realism breeds scepticism while claiming to be a common sense view of the world. Secondly, Putnam says that metaphysical realism is not able to serve

⁶ Putnam, *RTH*, p. 49.

⁷ Ibid.

as a useful model or picture because there is no 'view from nowhere' which would facilitate such a modelling. Externalism is old-style metaphysics and as such simply will not do.⁸

Putnam is keen to counter the possibility that metaphysical realism is able to present itself as a common sense view of the world. Certainly the first part of the definition he puts forward above could suggest such a view: i.e., that 'the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects' seems quite obviously acceptable. This view, simply expressed, is that the world obviously does not contain an infinite number of things. Rather, it is populated by a finite number of concrete (paradigmatically *real*) things like trees and tables and chairs. However there is more to metaphysical realism than this, says Putnam: the realists' picture of the world is actually much stranger than it at first seems.

This accusation rests on the need metaphysical realism has to 'fix' reference to be able to talk about (describe or model) the external world. That is, we use language to communicate how the world is; our words (or thoughts or images) represent the world to us. However, as we saw in Chapter One, because the realist says the world is a unified totality, he or she must provide a *way* in which our words and thoughts *hook on* to the entities in the world, to the particular states of affairs our words describe.

⁸ As discussed in Chapter One, overarching metaphysical theories of everything cannot resist the postmodern/deconstructionist critique.

Far from being 'common sense', it is actually very easy to inject scepticism into this picture. Putnam asks: how do we know that the reference relation R we have picked out is the (unique) reference relation we want? We could provide alternatives (and then not be able to choose between them). Putnam asks,

... what *fixes* R (the *true* reference relation, in the metaphysical realist sense, the God's-Eye-View-reference relation) as the reference relation? What singles it out? What makes it the case that the true reference relation isn't some other admissible reference relation, say, R_{17} ?⁹

Putnam claims that metaphysical realism simply cannot say how reference is fixed "without falling back on medieval-sounding talk of 'single causal structure', or 'causal powers', or 'natural constraints'."¹⁰ Thus, metaphysical realism moves away from common sense and adds in something "spooky".¹¹ He says,

... metaphysical realism is not just the view that there are, after all, chairs, and some of them are, after all, blue and we didn't just *make all that up*. Metaphysical realism presents itself as a powerful transcendental picture: a picture in which there is a fixed set of "language-independent" objects ... and a fixed "relation" between terms and their extensions.¹²

Phenomenalism is no help here either for the realist. If, like the positivists, object-talk is replaced by 'sense-data' talk this does not remove the problem of how the connection is made between our language (sense-data talk) and the world. On this view, 'the world' could easily drop out of the picture altogether. So, far from being

⁹ Hilary Putnam, 'Reply to Two Realists' in *The Journal of Philosophy*, October, 1982.

¹⁰ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 38.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 27.

common sense, the positivist solution is deeply counterintuitive, and in fact could easily collapse into idealism.

But, how could philosophers have been led to hold such a counterintuitive position?

Putnam claims that:

Since the seventeenth century the question of the existence of the "external" world - the world inhabited in common, of stars and mountains, chairs and tables, animals and humans - has been a central issue in epistemology. According to the traditional view, each of us is directly acquainted with his or her own "sense data" from which he or she "infers" (Descartes) or "constructs" (Berkeley) the commonsense world of sticks and stones. Neither Hume nor Kant, both of whom recognised the difficulties of the standard view, managed to overcome the source of the problem: the central assumption is that the knower and the "given" are separate from the world that is known by means of the given.¹³

Later he makes his own position clearer:

What I am saying, then, is that elements of what we call "language" or "mind" *penetrate so deeply into what we call "reality" that the very project of representing ourselves as being "mappers" of something "language-independent" is fatally compromised from the very start.*¹⁴ [Putnam's italics]

This leads on to Putnam's second general criticism of metaphysical realism, that it is impossible to create a coherent formal model of it. There always has to be a meta-description or meta-picture for it to make sense (that provides a God's Eye View), and this in turn cannot be modelled without a meta-description of *it*, and so

¹³ Ibid., p. 230.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 28.

on. Putnam says that the model-theoretic approach shows that our concepts are always bound by some scheme or other.¹⁵

Putnam uses an example he draws from Carnap to illustrate this.¹⁶ This could be called the 'How many objects?' argument. He imagines a world defined which contains three objects, x_1 , x_2 and x_3 . Putnam maintains that the answer to the question, 'How many objects are there?', depends on your *interests*. If you are a Polish logician, for example, the answer is 'seven' because different concatenations of objects create new objects (i.e., ' x_1+x_2 ' is a complex object consisting of x_1 concatenated with x_2).

A possible criticism of this way of looking at things is to say that we can think of examples where it simply makes no *sense* to group certain individual objects together. For example, if our three-object world consisted of 'my nose', the Eiffel Tower and a banana, it seems crazy to suggest that there is a composite object which consists of 'my nose and the Eiffel Tower.'¹⁷ However, from a strictly logical point of view, and this is the Polish logicians' point of view, the semantic incongruities are neither here nor there: *logically* there is no problem with such complex objects.

¹⁵ The formal statement of these problems is most explicitly looked at in Putnam's *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, London, 1978.

¹⁶ He refers to this argument in *RHF*, p.96ff; *MFR*, p. 32ff and elsewhere.

¹⁷ This is Putnam's own example.

A simpler version of the argument, Putnam says, is simply to ask 'How many objects are in this room?' The answer depends on what we count as an object, and the way out of any difficulty is obviously to come to an *agreement* with regard to our current conversation about what counts as an object. This is a sort of realism; but what there is in the world is not independent of our use of language. However, according to Putnam, this does not commit us to a nonrealist or sceptical position. He says,

What is wrong with the notion of objects existing 'independently' of conceptual schemes is that there are no standards for the use of even the logical notions apart from conceptual choices... The alternative ... is not the view that it's all *just* language. We can and should insist that some facts are there to be discovered and not legislated by us. But this is something to be said when one has adopted a way of speaking, a language, a 'conceptual scheme'.¹⁸

Putnam's main point is that there is no way of deciding which way of looking at the world is 'really true', and that even *asking* which is 'really true' makes no sense. We use different conceptual schemes, different languages, as necessary (if we are Polish logicians, we ignore composite objects at our peril). Putnam calls this 'conceptual relativity'.

The support Putnam gives to the existence of a plurality of descriptions, without any of these descriptions being 'neutral' (in the sense of being the way the world is independent of description), cuts at the heart of metaphysical realism. Putnam is

¹⁸ Hilary Putnam, *Representation & Reality*, Cambridge MA, 1988, p. 114.

clear that, while each description may be different, they are all descriptions of *reality*.

In saying this, I am, of course contesting a metaphysical claim which many philosophers ... wish to make about modern science, namely that science, and science alone, describes the world "as it is independent of language." I suspect that it is because I contest this thesis (contest its very intelligibility) that I provoke attacks...¹⁹

All this undermines the realist claim that there is a fixed way of describing the world. With it also goes the correspondence theory of truth - that our sentences are true iff ('if and only if') they are in a correct correspondence with some worldly state of affairs. Putnam is not as dismissive of the correspondence theory of truth as some other contemporary philosophers (e.g., Rorty). Putnam says that there is an ordinary sense of 'correspondence' which is to be preserved. On the other hand, the use of 'correspondence' by metaphysical realists is quite different. This use amounts to

... the metaphysical theory that there is a totality of All Objects ... such that *every* language's universe of discourse ... is just a subset of that totality ... and a Universal Correlation Relation which assigns truth-conditions to an arbitrary sentence in an arbitrary language in terms of the totalities in question.²⁰

Putnam thinks this picture of correspondence leads to paradox and confusion. On the other hand, he himself has no problem with the ordinary use of 'corresponding with facts' as a synonym for 'true'. I shall look at Putnam's positive account of what

¹⁹ Hilary Putnam, 'Comments and Replies', Chapter 10 of *Reading Putnam*, (eds.) Clark and Hale, p. 243.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

'truth' may amount to in the absence of any *theory* of correspondence, in the next section.

Hartry Field objects to the definition of metaphysical realism used in *Reason, Truth and History*. He is especially unhappy with Putnam's claim that metaphysical realism means that there should be 'one true theory', one true description of how the world is. However, Putnam restates his point in his reply to Field, attempting to show the absurdity of metaphysical realism. He says,

...suppose metaphysical realism is true. Then there is a definite set *I* of individuals of which the world consists... And there is a definite set *P* of all properties and relations of these individuals. Consider a "language" with a name for each member of *I* and a predicate for each member of *P*... This language is unique (up to isomorphism), and the theory of the world - the set of true sentences - is likewise unique. So there is nothing wrong with the assertion (which Field spends pages in criticizing) that, on a metaphysical realist view, there is "one true theory". Metaphysical realists have always thought in terms of an *ideal* language, not a natural one, with its vagueness, its finite vocabulary, etc.²¹

This notion of an ideal language is, of course, another link with positivism. From Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* onwards, positivist philosophers have attempted to find a neutral, logically unique interpretation of the world.²²

²¹ Putnam, 'Reply to Two Realists', p. 575.

²² It is extremely important to note that, although Wittgenstein's early work was an enormous influence in the shaping of logical positivism, he himself should never be included as a part of that movement. Russell's introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, London, 1972) provides clear evidence of how much Wittgenstein was misunderstood by Russell and the other positivists.

Field's article concerning Putnam's criticisms of metaphysical realism appears alongside one by Gilbert Harman.²³ Harman, who adopts a relativist stance with regard to ethics (we live in a world of scientific, objective facts but there is no such thing as an objective ethic), pinpoints the ethical origins of many of Putnam's fears about realism. That is, Putnam has moral qualms that are based on his belief, which Field also points out, that metaphysical realism will lead to relativism (because of the strict fact/value dichotomy realism needs to maintain), and he wishes to avoid ethical relativism. Putnam does not want to find a small place for values in a big world of facts. In fact, in 'A Defense of Internal Realism', which constitutes Putnam's full reply to both Field and Harman, he goes so far as to say that, "if a rebirth of full-bodied, red-blooded metaphysical realism were the way to get people to accept the objectivity of ethics, then I would almost be willing to pay the price of letting that happen."²⁴

This is a very strong claim, but retaining ethical objectivity is very important for Putnam. In *Reason, Truth and History*, he outlines the arguments most often used against the notion of objectivity in ethics, and tries to show how they fail to hit their mark. One argument, he says, starts from the premise that ethical maxims are only true 'for the most part'.²⁵ This provides the platform for a sceptical argument which says that there are no deductions possible from these sort of

²³ Gilbert Harman, 'Metaphysical Realism and Moral Relativisms: Reflections on Hilary Putnam's *Reason, Truth and History*', *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXXXIX, No. 10, October 1982, pp. 568-575.

²⁴ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 37.

²⁵ Putnam, *RTH*, p. 141f.

axioms (i.e., ones true for the most part), and therefore ethics is *irrational*. Being a pragmatist, Putnam has no problem dealing in 'for the most part' truths, but denies that this is a basis for scepticism. He also claims that what ethics (and indeed material-world talk) presupposes are *concepts* and not axioms. He says, "Concepts are used in observation and generalization, and are themselves made legitimate by the success we have in using them to describe and generalize."²⁶ The charge of irrationality therefore fails.

A more sophisticated argument, says Putnam, is that ethics involves *projection*, and that this taints any ethical 'observation'.²⁷ So, this argument claims, ethics is based on subjective feeling. At first, it might seem strange that Putnam both rejects this picture of ethics *and* metaphysical realism. However Putnam denies the suggestion that ethical subjectivism and metaphysical realism are somehow opposites. He says that currently "we tend to be too realistic about physics and too subjectivistic about ethics, and these are connected tendencies."²⁸ He goes on to explain,

It is *because* we are too realist about physics, because we see physics (or some hypothetical future physics) as the One True Theory, and not simply as a rationally acceptable description suited for certain problems and purposes, that we tend to be subjectivistic about descriptions we cannot 'reduce' to physics.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., p. 142.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 143.

²⁹ Ibid.

So Putnam believes that our experience of ethics is not just “mislocated subjective feeling”. He thinks we all have a “sense of justice” and “some idea of the good”, and that these are ‘objective’.³⁰ He admits that this is open to the criticism that such ideas are ‘unscientific’ and unjustifiable. However, Putnam counters by asking what ‘unscientific’ could actually mean here. He says,

A belief that there is such a thing as justice is not a belief in *ghosts* ... Justice is not something anyone proposes to *add to* the list of objects recognised by physics ... Ethics does not *conflict with* physics, as the term ‘unscientific’ suggests; it is simply that ‘just’ and ‘good’ and ‘sense of justice’ are concepts in a discourse which is not *reducible to* physical discourse ... Talk of ‘justice’, like talk of ‘reference’, can be *non-scientific* without being *unscientific*.³¹

2.3 Why ‘Internal’ Realism?

Very simply, ‘internal realism’ is the claim that the objectivity we have is purely a ‘human objectivity’ and no more.³² There is no external, fixed and unchanging perspective: reality is always from a particular point of view. More than this, this sort of realism is ‘internal’ because its statements of fact only make sense from within some specific *description*, that is, expressing a particular interest. This is even the case when we are considering descriptions of reality. Putnam makes this

³⁰ Ibid., p. 144.

³¹ Ibid., p. 145.

³² Putnam first made the distinction between ‘metaphysical’ and ‘internal’ realism in his presidential address to the American Philosophical Association in 1976.

explicit, saying that it “is characteristic of this view [the internalist perspective] to hold that *What objects does the world consist of?* is a question that it only makes sense to ask *within* a theory or description.”³³

There is a strong influence of Kant’s philosophy, entirely acknowledged, in Putnam’s conception of internal realism. In *Reason, Truth and History* Putnam even maintains that Kant was actually the first internal realist!³⁴ Putnam credits Kant with the insight that all the objectivity we have is a human objectivity, and acknowledges the role of the mind in the construction of our objective knowledge. Putnam says he is advancing the view that

... the mind does not simply ‘copy’ a world which admits of description by One True Theory. But my view is not a view in which the mind *makes up* the world, either... If one must use metaphorical language, then let the metaphor be this: the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world.³⁵

James Conant, in his introduction to *Realism with a Human Face*, says that,

This Kantian quest for a coherent conception of “what is objective humanly speaking” - a conception that avoids the twin perils of a relativism that denies the possibility of objective knowledge and of a metaphysical absolutism that transcends the limits of what is coherently conceivable - has emerged as perhaps the single most pervasive theme in Putnam’s recent work.³⁶

³³ Putnam, *RTH*, p. 49.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

³⁶ Conant, Introduction to *RHF*, p. xix.

Conant goes on to point out that it is in Kant where Putnam finds the connection he sees between ethical and metaphysical problems. He says that "Putnam finds in Kant a concern with the way in which the metaphysical realist's picture of scientific objectivity leads to a devaluation of the objectivity of moral judgement."³⁷

Kant's influence has been a consistent feature of Putnam's work. In his 1992 book, *Pragmatism*, Putnam says that "Kant was the first really to see that describing the world is not simply copying it. Kant saw that wherever human beings describe anything in the world, our description is shaped by our own conceptual choices."³⁸ Putnam believes that Kant realised we use different descriptions on different occasions for different purposes. According to Putnam, however, Kant's confusion or mistake was his idea of the noumenal 'Ding-an-sich'. This 'thing in itself' is reality as it is undescribed by us (and by definition thereby undescribable by us). However, as soon as we start thinking along these lines we end up wanting to ask what the description of the world in itself *is*, that is, as if we *could* describe it. But Putnam says this is "in effect, to ask how the world is to be described in the world's own language, and there is no such thing as the world's own language."³⁹ As Conant puts it,

Putnam's so-called internal realism - or, as he prefers to call it here, "realism with a small 'r'" - aims to set forth a conception of objectivity that is more faithful to our actual

³⁷ Ibid., p. xxi.

³⁸ Putnam, *Pr.*, p. 28.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

(both everyday and scientific) practices of adjudicating conflicting knowledge claims and achieving forms of rational consensus.⁴⁰

Although it is true that Putnam has modified internal realism over the years he has also presented this more as a matter of emphasis than radical change. That is, Putnam claims he has simply emphasised different *aspects* of internal realism at different times. For example, in *Meaning And The Moral Sciences* and *The Many Faces of Realism*, he is concerned to contrast his picture with metaphysical realism and expose the latter's inadequacies as a model; in *Reason, Truth and History*, he takes a critical look at the correspondence theory of truth and posits his own internalist view of truth; in *Realism With A Human Face*, he is exploring what he calls 'conceptual relativity', contrasting it again unfavourably with metaphysical realism. More recently, in *Words and Life*, Putnam remains committed to the Kantian view that a world/mind dichotomy cannot be maintained. This has lead him recently to a consideration of the nature of *perception* (see, for example his Dewey lectures referred to at the beginning of this chapter). The main difference between the account of internal realism in *Words and Life* from his earlier pronouncements is (as we will see in more detail later) that he regrets using a form of words which suggests there are certain things we *cannot* do (for example, provide a God's Eye View). He would now rather see the idea of a God's Eye View as unintelligible rather than impossible.

⁴⁰ Conant, Introduction to *RHF*, p. xix.

Peter Donovan, in his article, 'Theological Realism and the God's-Eye-View', says that Putnam's internal realism "may seem like a challenge to traditional theism" since it involves the rejection of a God's Eye View.⁴¹ But he says theologians who have read Putnam have misunderstood him over this. Donovan says,

The failure of a God's-Eye View as an ultimate metaphysical reference-point, need not in itself rule out a coherent account of theological realism. Putnam ... offers an approach whereby, without appealing to a God's-Eye View, the epistemic qualities we normally seek to capture by words like "object", "fact", "exist", "real" and "true" can be quite adequately taken care of.⁴²

For instance, Putnam claims that internal realism bypasses the problems that metaphysical realism has concerning truth and reference. It is his aim to reclaim our ordinary use of these notions (saving them from the machinations of philosophers). For example, with regard to the concept of 'reference', he asks to what the word 'rabbit' refers. "Why, to rabbits, of course!" is the disarming reply.⁴³ He goes on to admit that for the *externalist* (or metaphysical realist) the extension of the word 'rabbit' is also, uncontroversially, the set of rabbits.

However, Putnam maintains that the externalist "does not regard such statements as telling us what reference *is*. For him finding out what reference *is*, i.e. what the *nature* of the 'correspondence' between words and things is, is a pressing problem."⁴⁴ The externalist needs to find this out to make his theory of reference

⁴¹ Donovan, p. 2.

⁴² Ibid., p. 4.

⁴³ Putnam, *RTH*, p. 52.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

work. Incidentally, Putnam points out, a *causal* explication of reference is no help for the metaphysical realist, as we can refer to things where there exists (or could exist) no causal chain, for example 'extraterrestrials' or 'unicorns'. He says that there is an "open texture"⁴⁵ to the notion of reference, and compares this with what Wittgenstein famously says about 'games'. That is, very briefly, Wittgenstein was concerned to show that there is no essence or definition in common for all types of games. There is no one feature which they all have in common by virtue of which we call them 'games'. Rather, they share what Wittgenstein calls a 'family resemblance'; overlapping similarities, rather than an essence. 'Reference' is also a family resemblance word according to Putnam. Of course, he admits that this goes against the philosophical grain, in that surely part of what philosophy is about is the tightening up of concepts!⁴⁶ However, Putnam says that what Wittgenstein shows is that many of our concepts, including some held dear by philosophers, have an irreducible flexibility of use.

An important feature of internal realism (in all its incarnations) is the breaking down of the dichotomy between fact and value. Positivism says what a fact is, is clear - it is some sort of object or state of affair, observable and 'scientific'. However, we have already seen that Putnam thinks that we have, through the huge influence of positivism, ended up being far too realist about physics (facts) and far too subjective about ethics (values). Science itself, Putnam says, is shot

⁴⁵ Putnam, *R&R*, p. 3. (The phrase "open texture" is from Waismann.)

⁴⁶ Ibid.

through with values because it is part of an idea we have about human flourishing.⁴⁷ Science on occasion discards some 'facts' if they conflict with a new way of looking at things, or with new purposes. So, facts are not neutral things existing apart from ourselves and our history, they too have a history tied up with our own.⁴⁸ Putnam goes on to say that the scientific aspirations of 'simplicity' and 'coherence' are clearly value concepts; they are expressions of a "pro-attitude".⁴⁹ These are not neutral properties, but something *we value*.

This is not, though, to *reduce* facts to values (this is Richard Rorty's position). The point is simply that science (the world of facts) should not be considered as somehow external, in the sense of neutral and unchanging. Putnam says we must not confuse

... science as it actually is - an ongoing activity whose results, spectacular as they are, are ever subject to modification, revision, and incorporation in a different theory or a different perspective - with any metaphysical picture that tries to wrap itself in the mantle of science.⁵⁰

Facts and values are *entangled*, neither one reducible to the other, such is their interdependence. Putnam claims that this was a theme in John Dewey's philosophy, but then became a strain of thought neglected by later pragmatists.⁵¹ He thinks it is time we picked up on it again. He says that,

⁴⁷ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 141.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 165f.

Recognising that the entanglement of fact and value, as well as of science and ethics, science and metaphysics, analytic and synthetic, is here to stay may also help us to see our own way past another contemporary shibboleth: the supposed incompatibility of universalist (or “enlightenment”) and parochial values.⁵²

There will be more said about the dichotomy between universal and parochial values later when we consider George Lindbeck’s postliberal theology (an internal, ‘parochial’ theology if you like), and also when we compare Putnam and Lindbeck in the final chapter of this thesis.

Putnam’s early exposition of internal realism, in particular in *Reason, Truth and History*, does create some problems though. It is at this point in the development of his thought that he is most vulnerable to the criticism that he falls into relativism. One of the problems is with Putnam’s positive account of truth (having dismissed the naive correspondence theory of the metaphysical realist). He does not want to lose the notion of truth, but says that it is not at all necessary to formulate a *theory* of truth. However, then, perhaps the notion of truth itself should simply drop out of things? Richard Rorty proposes this sort of radical move, but Putnam wants to avoid doing this. But because no theory is forthcoming, what Putnam does is to give us some persuasive arguments or pictures about how the concept of truth works; to try and show how the concept is used.

⁵² Ibid., p. 177.

Putnam seems in many places to favour a 'coherence' picture of truth (following the American pragmatists). That is, he says truth is "ultimate goodness of fit."⁵³ However, the problem with coherence, as he points out, is that "our notion of coherence has proved to be extremely topic-relative."⁵⁴ However, he believes *any* account of truth will have the same difficulty. He says it looks as if there could be no way of making a concept which is both so complex and so vague, into a 'science' (or philosophical theory).⁵⁵ So when Putnam presents his own account of truth - as idealised warranted assertibility⁵⁶ - it is with persuasion rather than proof. He thinks his definition is a reasonable and useful one. All this does not mean to say that Putnam does not provide arguments. He does, and they are often very detailed. He simply thinks that it is impossible to *specify* the notion of truth, or truth-conditions, or any related notion, outside of mathematical logic. However, in our *use* of the concept we need no such specification.

Putnam expresses his own account of truth variously as 'idealised rational acceptability' or 'idealised warrant'. That is, what we would say was 'true' under ideal epistemic conditions. This is not just rational acceptability - 'the earth is flat' was once a rationally acceptable thing to say⁵⁷ - but under *ideal* conditions (what we would say if we had sailed round the world? or had looked at the earth from space?).

⁵³ Putnam, *RTH*, p. 64.

⁵⁴ Hilary Putnam, *Realism and Reason. Philosophical Papers Vol. III*, Cambridge, 1983. p. 301.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

⁵⁶ Putnam takes the notion of warranted assertability from the work of John Dewey.

⁵⁷ Putnam, *RTH*, p. 54

This looks like positivism - but is it? No, because Putnam claims truth is non-epistemic in the sense that what is true is not parasitic on what we *know*, i.e., *specified*. It is not possible to make a formal specification. Putnam says,

If assertibility (in the sense of *warranted* assertibility) is not formalizable, idealized warranted assertibility (truth) is even less so, for the notion of better or worse epistemic conditions (for a particular judgement) upon which it depends is revisable as our empirical knowledge increases. That it is, nevertheless, a meaningful notion; that there *are* better and worse epistemic conditions for most judgements, and a fact of the matter as to what the verdict would be if the conditions were sufficiently good, a verdict to which opinion would 'converge' if we were reasonable, is the heart of my own 'realism'.⁵⁸

Recently, he has pointed out that his use early on of the notion of 'ideal epistemic conditions' led to misunderstandings and he decided to drop talk of 'ideal' and simply refer to "sufficiently good conditions".⁵⁹ He says it is not difficult to imagine what 'sufficiently good conditions' might amount to in specific cases. For an observation sentence, it might involve being in a good position, in good light, and so on. Such a notion should not raise philosophical difficulties. However, he asks what happens for a historical question. For example, the statement 'Caesar had someone shave him on the day he crossed the Rubicon'. Putnam says that this has a determinate truth value and, again, ideal conditions for finding what that truth value is are not hard to imagine.⁶⁰ But it might be asked, what about a truth value *now*? Putnam says, "If this is a 'metaphysical question', it seems to me that it

⁵⁸ Putnam, *Realism and Reason*, p. xviii.

⁵⁹ Putnam, 'Comments and Replies', p. 257.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 258.

has a decidedly non-metaphysical answer.”⁶¹ That is, we can still imagine what sufficiently good conditions for finding out a truth value would be. Putnam says that it might be concluded that this is all very well for matters of fact or observation. However,

... with respect to other kinds of judgement, e.g. judgements of rationality, and moral judgements, this may seem unsatisfactory. Here, after all there is frequently dispute as to what would constitute a sufficiently good epistemic situation for determining the truth of the judgement.⁶²

In this case, though, Putnam says we have convictions about what would or would not make up sufficiently good conditions, and also, importantly, that we can provide reasons for these convictions. The reasons given may take the form of methodological arguments, moral arguments or other types of arguments or reasons appropriate to the dispute in question. This, Putnam claims, is a Wittgensteinian way of looking at things. He says,

... Wittgenstein's answer to what makes judgements "correct" is in terms of notions like "understanding people" ..., "experience", and even ... "imponderable evidence". And these are just the sorts of answer we ordinarily give; they are not metaphysical answers.⁶³

Another potential problem, however, with Putnam's early exposition of internal realism is that he talks as if our concepts, thoughts, beliefs about the world are always to some degree *chosen* by us. He says that while there are, obviously, experiential inputs, there are no inputs "*which are not themselves to some extent*

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 259.

shaped by our concepts” [Putnam’s italics]. This shaping is “by the vocabulary we use to report and describe them” and there are no inputs “which admit of only one description, independent of all conceptual choices.”⁶⁴

However, this notion of choice is problematic. For example, if I have a dubious conceptual scheme like ‘I can fly’ (to use Putnam’s own example), then how are the, quite non-negotiable, experiential inputs of gravitational force and the hardness and inflexibility of the ground below ‘shaped by my concepts’? If I throw myself out of a top floor window shouting “Up, up and away!”, would what I subsequently experience be irresistible inputs of a certain unfortunate kind and/or a sudden change of conceptual scheme? Putnam suggests that I would *choose* a different conceptual scheme (perhaps, ‘Oops, I can’t fly after all’). But this is a strange idea of choice. The new conceptual scheme would, I think, be *forced* on me and not be something I had an option to choose.

So, why does Putnam resort to talking about *choosing* conceptual schemes? He is keen, as we have seen, to emphasise the non-neutrality of our descriptions. There is a plurality of possible descriptions, but no ‘one true description’. But what Putnam ends up suggesting is, firstly, that all we have are various descriptions and, secondly, that we can simply choose between them as we like. Fortunately,

⁶⁴ Putnam, *RTH*, p. 54.

though, the idea of choice is something that largely drops out of Putnam's picture of internal realism after *Reason, Truth and History*.

The first problem then looks the more pressing of the two. However, there are kinder ways of expressing this particular criticism. Saying 'all we have are our descriptions' is a bit misleading. Putnam is clear that we have our descriptions and we have the world. The mistake is to think that there is a possible neutral description of the world to which all other descriptions must defer. This goes back to Putnam's argument about Carnapian objects. We clarify how 'object' is defined, and once this is clear or agreed, "the question 'How many objects exist?' has an answer which is not at all a matter of 'convention'."⁶⁵

2.4 Rorty and Relativism

Putnam has been engaged in dialogue and debate with Richard Rorty for many years. Despite this, as we have seen, some commentators (including theologians) have concluded that they hold similar views and are both nonrealist philosophers. This is, I suspect, a result both of misreading *Reason, Truth and History* (or of *only* reading *Reason, Truth and History*!) and Putnam's own difficulty in that book in

⁶⁵ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 98.

making clear some key points, e.g., his talk of 'choosing' a conceptual scheme, which we looked at in the previous section. It is crucial to realise that Putnam's and Rorty's philosophies are not the same, especially because Putnam's criticisms of Rorty centre around the claim that Rorty's views lead to relativism and scepticism, which we have seen Putnam so keen to avoid himself.

Rorty, whom we referred to briefly in Chapter One, has been influenced to a large degree by 'continental' philosophy. As we saw, his 1980 book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, is an attempt to 'deconstruct' western, analytical philosophy.⁶⁶ The book's main thesis is that the way western philosophy has viewed the relation between mind (and language) and the world is completely wrong. According to Rorty, mind and language do not simply *mirror* the world, despite this having become the dominant metaphor. Discrediting this metaphor removes the need for 'representations', and problems of truth and reference are, Rorty thinks, thereby dissolved. It is a full-bodied attempt to undermine epistemology and with it the whole edifice of western philosophy which has been based on Cartesian epistemological foundationalism.

As has already been noted, Putnam and Rorty share a similar background as American analytic philosophers influenced by that country's pragmatist tradition. Both have come to reject foundationalist epistemologies and both are critical of

⁶⁶ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, 1980.

metaphysical realism. There are many points of disagreement though. For a start, Putnam rejects Rorty's anti-representationalism. As we have seen, he is opposed to the possibility of our losing our ordinary sense of certain words simply because they have been seen to have become philosophically problematic. Putnam says,

While I agree with Rorty that metaphysical realism is unintelligible, to stop with that point without going on to recover our ordinary notion of representation (and a world of things to be represented) is to fail to complete that journey "from the familiar to the familiar" that is the task of philosophy.⁶⁷

Putnam acknowledges the background he shares with Rorty, but goes on to say that,

... it seems to me that while I have moved from versions of 'internal realism' I put forward after I left physicalism [a version of metaphysical realism] to a position which I would describe as increasingly realist, ... Rorty has moved from his physicalism to an extreme linguistic idealism which teeters on the edge of solipsism.⁶⁸

That is, while Putnam agrees with Rorty that there is no 'view from nowhere', that we describe the world from where we are, this does not mean that we describe from within some sort of vacuum. This is why Putnam's use of 'choice' above caused problems. We are not some lonely agent choosing between world views, constructing reality as we will.

Peter Donovan, whose article we considered earlier, says that Putnam's complaint against Rorty is that while he (Rorty) says there is no God's Eye View, he says it

⁶⁷ Hilary Putnam, *W&L*, p. 300. (The quotation is from John Wisdom, *Mind*, October, 1938.)

⁶⁸ Putnam, *W&L*, p. 306.

as if from a God's Eye View. In other words, he wants to have his philosophical cake and still eat it. So there is a problem of consistency for the nonrealist here, says Donovan, and he goes on to point out that Don Cupitt ("Rorty's theological counterpart") has the same problem.⁶⁹ He says this is the sort of confusion that a commitment to an "over-simple" realism/nonrealism dichotomy will engender. However, Donovan quotes Putnam as claiming, "What is important in philosophy is not just to say, "I reject the realist/antirealist controversy", but to show that (and how) both sides *misrepresent* the lives we live with our concepts."⁷⁰

Putnam claims it is a "great Rortian thesis" that we cannot describe reality 'as it is in itself',⁷¹ and points out that this is where Rorty sees himself in agreement with Wittgenstein. But Rorty gets Wittgenstein wrong. What Wittgenstein actually strongly implies, according to Putnam (and correctly), is that there "is no interesting thesis in this area".⁷² It simply makes no *sense* to say that 'we can't describe reality as it is in itself'. This is not something we *can't* do, it is an *unintelligible* thing. Putnam summarises:

... there is an enormous difference between Kantian tone, which Rorty retains by saying we *can't* describe reality as it is in itself, and the Wittgensteinian tone which is to try to make his reader *not want to say* either "we can describe reality as it is in itself" or "we can't describe reality as it is in itself".⁷³

⁶⁹ Donovan, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 20.

⁷¹ Putnam, *Pr.*, p. 39

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 40.

Rorty vacillates between two main responses to Putnam's criticisms. Firstly, he expresses frustration that Putnam should think that there are any truly major philosophical differences between them; he thinks they agree on more than they differ. Secondly, he admits that there *are* differences between them but claims that he, Rorty, is being the more honest or (pragmatically) realistic philosopher. He suggests that Putnam is a romantic about human nature.⁷⁴

As far as the first point goes, it certainly might seem that Putnam's construal of internal realism as 'conceptual relativism' could also be seen as a type of linguistic idealism and thus be open to the same criticism he levels against Rorty. Putnam explicitly denies this.⁷⁵ He claims that it is Rorty's wrong reading of Wittgenstein on language-games which have formed Rorty's 'radical theses' and which Putnam does not share. We do not have to say that any description of the world is as good as any other. This is not what Putnam means by 'conceptual relativism'. Rather, it is Rorty, according to Putnam, who ends up having to claim

... that there is no such thing as one language game being better than another, that there is only being better relative to this, that or the other interest, and that we cannot say (according to Rorty) that Newton's physics is superior to Aristotle's physics, or that there are things that Aristotle's physics got wrong and that Newton's physics got right.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Richard Rorty, 'Putnam and the Relativist Menace', *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XC, No. 9, September 1993.

⁷⁵ For example, in *MFR*, p. 32.

⁷⁶ Putnam, *Pr.*, p. 38

Of course, Rorty denies that he is a relativist (no-one wants to get caught up in the self-refuting conundrums that admitting straightforwardly to relativism would imply). He says that the term 'relativist' is usually the derogatory name given to *pragmatists* by *realists*!⁷⁷ He distinguishes three different views which have been labelled 'relativist'. These are that:

- (1) every belief is as good as every other;
- (2) 'true' is equivocal, dependent on type of justification; and
- (3) you cannot talk about truth outside procedures of justification within a given society.⁷⁸

Rorty endorses this ethnocentric third definition (and in passing also identifies it with Putnam's internal realism), but says that it is not a relativist position but a *pragmatist* one. However, as we shall see, the point that Putnam wishes to make (and which distances him from Rorty's view) is that it is not pragmatism to say that any given society's view of truth or justification is equally good. Rorty's ethnocentric stance does not allow such evaluations to be made. This ethnocentrism is also not internal realism - there are better or worse societies according to Putnam, and better and worse points of view. Putnam says that Rorty's position means that we cannot appeal to any 'fact of the matter' to arbitrate between views. Yet, it is clear that in many cases this is exactly what we

⁷⁷ Richard Rorty, 'Solidarity or Objectivity' in *Post-Analytical Philosophy* (eds. Rajchman and West), New York, 1985, p. 5.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

do, and that Rorty would act similarly. For example, says Putnam, there are many Americans who believe that there are still U.S. prisoners-of-war in Vietnam. Putnam says that Rorty must agree that there is a fact of the matter which will arbitrate here. It is not the case that somehow *for these people* there are still P.O.W.s in Vietnam.⁷⁹

In *Realism with a Human Face*, Putnam sets out some principles concerning his notion of 'warranted belief' (or simply referred to as 'warrant'). The first of these principles (with which he says Rorty is "certain to disagree")⁸⁰ is that, all other things being equal, "there is usually a fact of the matter as to whether the statements people make are warranted or not."⁸¹ Putnam claims that this principle has been held by all pragmatist thinkers from Pierce onwards.

The notion of warrant undermines both Rorty's claim to pragmatism and his denial of relativism. Putnam is following Dewey using 'warrant' or 'warranted belief' instead of the concept of 'justification'. This is because 'justification' is only appropriate to some cases. For example, Putnam says, "if I am sincerely convinced that I had eggs for breakfast, it makes sense to ask if I am right, but no sense to ask if I have a 'justification'."⁸² A possible criticism of this notion is the claim that 'warrant' must be strictly relative to a peer-group or society. However, Putnam

⁷⁹ Putnam, *Pr.*, p. 34f.

⁸⁰ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 21.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., p. 323.

says that the concept has a built-in (internal) aspect of independence, which is a property of the word itself.

Springsted, whose article on Putnam we referred to in the Introduction, contrasts Putnam's and Rorty's positions, and he notes the influence of Kant's thought generally on Anglo-American philosophy. Under this Kantian influence, since the mind and experience in some sense help create the world, reasons become internal to a way of life.⁸³ But looking at things this way lets in relativism, says Springsted - it leaves us with Rorty's position. Putnam, however, avoids this difficulty, according to Springsted, because he repudiates both any scientific positivism and Rorty's ethnocentric view.⁸⁴ Since, for Putnam, 'the mind and the world make up the mind and the world', reason is not directionless. It has a direction and a meaning as part of the pursuit of human flourishing. Thus, Putnam's conviction about the intermingling of facts and values is an "important development" of which theology needs to take note.⁸⁵

Rorty, however, sees ideology lurking in analytical philosophy's attacks on 'relativism'. He claims that the idea that we should avoid relativism at all costs is "most comprehensible as an expression of the need to preserve certain habits of contemporary European life."⁸⁶ This is part of his critique of western philosophy.

⁸³ Springsted, p. 170.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 171.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 174.

⁸⁶ Richard Rorty, 'Solidarity or Objectivity', p. 6.

In a survey of contemporary American philosophy, Rajchman says that “Rorty thinks that there was a ‘hidden agenda’ behind the central problems in analytical philosophy: the defense of the values of science, democracy and art on the part of secular intellectuals.”⁸⁷

Putnam also thinks that there are unpalatable ethical consequences to Rorty’s ethnocentric stance. We must be able to judge between better or worse societies.

Rorty responds:

Putnam sees me as relativistic because I can appeal to no ‘fact of the matter’ to adjudicate between the possible world in which the Nazis won, inhabited by people for whom the Nazis’ racism seems common sense and our egalitarian tolerance crazy, and the world in which we won and the Nazis’ racism seems crazy.⁸⁸

Rorty says that it is true that there is no fact of the matter to help us to decide, but he says Putnam also has the same problem. He says Putnam sees truth as acceptable to an ideal community (ourselves as we’d like to be) and claims that this is what he (Rorty) is also saying. However, Rorty misrepresents Putnam’s position, and his own argument is circular because of his ethnocentrism. In his picture he is talking about ‘*us as we’d like to be*’ (“language users whom we recognise as better versions of ourselves”).⁸⁹ But he is assuming that ‘we’ would be able to recognise ‘us’! Ultimately Rorty does not explain *why* liberalism is

⁸⁷ Rajchman, ‘Philosophy in America’, *Post-Analytical Philosophy*, p. xii.

⁸⁸ Rorty, ‘Putnam and the Relativist Menace’, p. 451.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

preferable to Nazism. Putnam, as we have seen, thinks that there can be objective truths, not just truths ‘for me’ or truths ‘for a community’. He says,

... to say that truth is objective (with a small “o”) is just to say that it is a property of truth that whether a sentence is true is logically independent of whether a majority of the members of the culture *believe* it to be true. And this is not a solution to the grand metaphysical question of Realism or Idealism, but simply a feature of our notion of truth.⁹⁰

Putnam’s position allows for progress. He says elsewhere,

... the fact is not just that we *do* change our norms and standards, but that doing so is often an improvement. An improvement from where? From within *our* picture of the world of course. But from within that picture itself, *we* say that “better” isn’t the same as “*we* think it’s better”.⁹¹

Putnam says that if we follow Rorty’s route we end up in the “self-refuting relativism of Protagoras. Like Protagoras, we abandon all distinction between *being right* and *thinking one is right*.”⁹² While Rorty still wants to be able to talk of ‘better’ and ‘worse’, it is hard to see what sense he can really make of these concepts. He loses all sense of reform and progress. This is Tom Sorrell’s criticism of Rorty, that Rorty wants to ‘keep the conversation going’ although his position means that these notions lose any meaning. Sorrell asks, “Keep the conversation going for what?”⁹³

⁹⁰ Putnam, *R&R*, p. 109.

⁹¹ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 26.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 139.

⁹³ Tom Sorrell, ‘The World from its Own Point of View’ in *Reading Rorty* (ed.) Alan Malachowski, Oxford, 1990, p. 12.

Another contrast is that, while Putnam shares with Rorty the pragmatic emphasis on fallibilism (that our beliefs are revisable), Putnam takes a strong anti-sceptical position which Rorty does not. This antiscepticism is also part of the pragmatic tradition. Putnam follows Pierce in pointing out that doubt requires justification as much as belief.⁹⁴ So, we are not justified in doubting *just anything* - this is patently not what fallibilism says. It is not a form of scepticism.

Interestingly, while Rorty's third definition of relativism as ethnocentrism does put a limit on the notion of truth, elsewhere he says we can do without the notion at all; 'is true' is simply an "empty compliment"⁹⁵ we pay to those statements we happen to like. Rorty often strikes this sort of revisionist note in his work. While commenting on Rorty's antifoundationalism (which we have seen Putnam shares) - the idea we have seen that our objective knowledge does not need to be *grounded* in some sure way - Putnam remarks on Rorty's radical revisionist outlook. He says that, "for Rorty or Foucault or Derrida, the failure of foundationalism makes a difference to how we are allowed to talk in ordinary life - a difference as to whether and when we are allowed to use words like 'know', 'objective', 'fact', and 'reason'."⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Putnam, *Pr.*, p.19. Pierce's thesis about the justification or appropriateness of doubt appears in his critique of Descartes. Such a view is also expressed by J. L. Austin and also in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*.

⁹⁵ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume I*, Cambridge, 1991, p. 23.

⁹⁶ Putnam, *RHF* p. 20.

However, in reply, Rorty explicitly rejects this criticism:

I do not think I have ever written anything that suggests that I wish to alter ordinary ways of using 'know', 'objective', 'fact' and 'reason'. Like Bishop Berkeley, William James, Putnam, and most other paradox-mongering philosophers ..., I have urged that we continue to speak with the vulgar while offering a different philosophical gloss on this speech than that offered by the realist tradition.⁹⁷

However, this quotation still implies philosophical revisionism,⁹⁸ with its talk of "the vulgar". Rorty is suggesting that, while we may continue to use certain words in the 'ordinary' way, *we clever philosophers* really know this makes no sense. Following continental trends, Rorty says he sees philosophy as a 'kind of writing', and it is hard to square this with pragmatism. Putnam, of course, believes that a truly pragmatic philosophy will actually undermine Rorty's position. He says, "If the vision of fact, theory, value and interpretation as interpenetrating undermines a certain sort of metaphysical realism, it equally, I believe, undermines fashionable versions of antirealism and 'postmodernism'."⁹⁹

In the next chapter we shall see how Putnam goes on to characterise his internal realism within a developing view of the 'task of philosophy'. His argument against the incommensurability of languages or conceptual schemes will also be evaluated, particularly in the light of his examination of Wittgenstein's analysis of religious language and belief.

⁹⁷ Rorty, 'Putnam and the Relativist Menace', p. 444.

⁹⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, in his review of Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (*The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. LXXXVII, No. 12, 1990, pp. 708-711), describes its tone as "didactic" (p. 711).

⁹⁹ Putnam, *Pr.*, p. xii.

CHAPTER THREE:

PUTNAM, LANGUAGE AND RELIGION

3.1 Introduction: 'Philosophy as the Education of Grown-Ups'¹

We saw in the previous chapter that Putnam's realism is the result of a desire to avoid unnecessary and unfruitful sceptical moves in philosophy. At the same time it takes on board a kind of relativism, but one that is Kantian in origin ('conceptual relativism'). This means that Putnam can attempt to steer a path between an unacceptable metaphysical realism and an equally unacceptable scepticism, in the forms of nonrealism and radical relativism. In his 1994 Dewey Lectures, Putnam explicitly identifies his concern as "the search for a middle way between reactionary metaphysics and irresponsible relativism."²

As part of this search - which leads him to consider the nature, scope and importance of philosophy itself - Putnam explores the pervasiveness of what he calls the 'craving for objectivity'. This is an attempt to uncover and understand the impetus towards metaphysical realism, and the resultant scepticism we have

¹ This phrase which Putnam adopts is from Stanley Cavell. James Conant says that it suggests two things which have become important to Putnam. These are that philosophy's "audience is everyone and that its curriculum can never be definitively settled (no subject of human concern being in principle extracurricular to the interests of philosophical reflection)." (*RHF*, p. lxiv).

² Putnam, 'Sense, Nonsense and the Senses', p. 447.

seen this position engenders. James Conant says of *Realism with a Human Face* that

Throughout ... the reader will find Putnam suggesting that our philosophical "craving" for an unattainably high pitch of certainty (and the ensuing forms of all-consuming doubt that it precipitates) is rooted deeper in the human animal than has been hitherto generally acknowledged by those who undertake to propose "solutions" to the problems that our craving for philosophy spins off.³

Putnam has lately construed the issue slightly differently. The craving for objectivity and certainty leads us to feel *limited*, and this is what he now identifies as a major form of scepticism. Conant says, in the introduction to *Words and Life* (his later collection of Putnam's papers) that "Putnam takes skepticism, employing ... a terminology he borrows from Cavell, to be the expression of a natural human disappointment with the reach of knowledge."⁴ So, scepticism is not simply construed as saying we can never know anything. It can also be the constricting disappointment we feel over the limitations of the knowledge we actually do have. Putnam thinks these sorts of philosophically defined limits are simply unintelligible, and yet not easily either avoided or ignored.

Putnam follows Wittgenstein in suggesting that if philosophical waters are muddied, it is because they have been muddied by philosophers! Putnam prefers to say that,

Rather than looking with suspicion on the claim that some value judgements are reasonable and some are unreasonable,

³ Conant, Introduction to *RHF*, p. xlii.

⁴ Conant, Introduction to *W&L*, p. xxxix.

or some views are true and some false, or some words refer and some do not, I am concerned with bringing us back to precisely these claims, which we do, after all, constantly make in our daily lives. Accepting the “manifest image”, the *Lebenswelt*, the world as we actually experience it, demands of us who have (for better or for worse) been philosophically trained that we both regain our sense of mystery ... and our sense of the common ...⁵

He wants us to remember that philosophy is a humanity and not a science. It is quite rightly concerned with (and shot through with) *values*. Of course, as he has pointed out, *science* is also shot through with values. He emphasises that,

... we should recognise that *all* values, including the cognitive ones, derive their authority from our idea of human flourishing and our idea of reason. These two ideas are interconnected: our image of an ideal theoretical intelligence is simply *part* of our ideal of total human flourishing, and makes no sense wrenched out of the total ideal ...⁶

Putnam thinks that philosophy has lost sight of this. He believes that analytic philosophy has become too enamoured with a particular view of science, one that does not take into consideration the way that values may determine our very idea of science. As we have seen, this view leads us to believe that “science, and only science, describes the world as it is in itself, independent of perspective.”⁷ This, we saw in the last chapter, is the inspiration for metaphysical realism which Putnam tries to combat with his own ‘internal’ realism.

⁵ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 118.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁷ Putnam, *RP*, p. x.

Putnam admits there are philosophers in the analytical tradition who resist this sort of scientism (he mentions Strawson, McDowell, Kripke and Dummett). However, he says it remains the case that recently it seems that “all that is left for philosophy is to try and anticipate what the presumed scientific solution to all metaphysical problems will look like.”⁸ For example, he thinks that this has led to the “decidedly premature” optimism seen in philosophical quarters for Artificial Intelligence.⁹ He is also critical of philosophers who jump too far in the other direction. These thinkers (he names Derrida, Goodman and Rorty) “have reacted to the difficulty of making sense of our cognitive relation to the world by denying that we do have a cognitive relation to extra linguistic reality.” They are thus, he continues, guilty of “throwing the baby out with the bathwater.”¹⁰

Putnam’s own positive view is that philosophy should take Kant’s lead with regard to the ‘primacy of practical reason’. It should be more concerned with our beliefs and actual human practices; our words and deeds. We need to look at Putnam’s reappropriation of this Kantian notion of the primacy of ‘practical reason’ (which is also echoed in Wittgenstein as talk of ‘common’ language, etc.) before we move on to consider more of Putnam’s attempt at a ‘middle way’. Putnam says that part of Kant’s idea of the primacy of practical reason (from the Doctrine of method in the *Critique*) is to claim that scientific knowledge is, in fact, a result of human values. He goes on to explain:

⁸ Ibid. Putnam cites Bernard Williams as a philosopher who adopts this approach.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Putnam, *RP*, p. xi.

Kant was saying that the norms which guide theoretical science in its greatest achievements are norms which derive from a certain notion we have of what the perfection of human inquiry would be, from a certain image of human flourishing in the theoretical realm.¹¹

Putnam says Kant believes that this applies equally to philosophy and not just to science. Putnam goes on to explain, "We cannot, Kant thinks, construct a moral image of the world by seeking to prove apriori that there are value judgements."¹² Rather, it works the other way around because the argument is a transcendental one. He says,

The strategy is to say: As a being who makes value judgements every day, I am *of course* committed to the idea that there are true value judgements; *what must be the case if there are to be true value judgements?* In what kind of world can there be true value judgements?¹³

Putnam also links this Kantian primacy of practical reason to two of his other philosophical heroes: James Dewey and Wittgenstein. Dewey, Putnam says, saw that philosophy should not attempt to provide a metaphysical 'theory of everything', but to engage in criticism of culture. Putnam says,

Kant's philosophy, in spite of its metaphysical excesses, was intended as a criticism of culture, as a sketch or plan for an enlightened society making progress towards a state in which social justice, as measured by the formula that reward would be proportional to virtue, would reign.¹⁴

¹¹ Putnam *Pr.*, p. 42-3.

¹² Ibid. p. 43.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 44.

Putnam sees Wittgenstein's philosophy as also sharing a moral purpose. This will become more obvious as we look at Putnam's account of Wittgenstein and religious belief and language. Wittgenstein is not saying, along with Rorty, that language *limits* us. For example, as we saw in Chapter One, a common view is that religious belief may form a self-contained 'language-game'. On the contrary, Putnam points out that what Wittgenstein is doing is "urging a certain kind of empathetic understanding."¹⁵ Otherwise, if we see language as constricting or limiting, this seems to lead to a limiting of our *understanding*, and we lose confidence about our ability to communicate.

Colin Lyas is puzzled, however, over Putnam's criticisms of analytic philosophy. In his review of *Renewing Philosophy*, he says that we see the tools of analytical philosophy used extremely well and to great effect in Putnam's own work. These tools include "scrupulous attention to the exact meanings of terms"; "detection of ambiguities which vitiate arguments"; and "whether the premisses [of an argument] are true, and, if they are true, whether the conclusions drawn from them in fact follow."¹⁶ Lyas says that Putnam employs these tools so well that it makes him wonder why he thinks such a philosophy needs 'renewed'! But Lyas suggests, and I think correctly, that it is because these sorts of tools are used most effectively to *criticise* rather than to build a positive philosophical view, that Putnam wishes for change. Putnam admits he is "growing tired of criticizing the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 50. We shall consider Putnam's use of this concept further in Chapter Six.

¹⁶ Colin Lyas, review of *RP* in *Philosophical Books*, Vol. 36 1995, p. 27.

errors of contemporary philosophers, analytic and non-analytic alike. ... I wish to sketch a better way in philosophy.”¹⁷

However, this may actually start to sound very *unlike* Wittgenstein. The later Wittgenstein is often portrayed as anti-theory and anti-philosophy (Rorty, for instance, clearly interprets Wittgenstein in this way). Wittgenstein wants to dissolve philosophical problems, not create new ones. However, the explicit hope that Putnam is expressing here for a positive philosophy is a result of his frustration with the fruitless philosophical dichotomies endlessly revisited and also with the unacceptable consequences of moral relativism. This sort of hope is not similarly expressed in Wittgenstein’s work, but Wittgenstein does exhibit the same frustrations and worries about philosophy. Wittgenstein is exasperated by the pseudo-problems philosophy gets caught up with, yet there is of course a positive outcome to ridding ourselves of these. Putnam continually points out the ethical aspects of Wittgenstein’s work. This is why, I believe, he ties Wittgenstein’s philosophy in with the Kantian idea of the primacy of practical reason.

Wittgenstein saw the way philosophers can often be ‘held captive’, he says, by an idea or picture, and this is what perpetuates philosophical puzzles.¹⁸ What we must realise is that certain pictures can stop us seeing how we actually talk and behave; we need to look at how language works when we are not philosophising.

¹⁷ Putnam, *RP*, p. 141.

¹⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 115. As we shall see later, Putnam believes that Wittgenstein does not think that all pictures *per se* are bad.

Wittgenstein speaks of our 'bewitchment' by language. But this is not simple error. These things *appeal* to us. It is not possible simply to walk away. It is not surprising, then, that Putnam is not at all impressed by Richard Rorty's simple dismissal of many of the traditional philosophical problems, nor by deconstructionist moves to undermine philosophy. He says that,

... the illusions that philosophy spins are illusions that belong to the nature of human life itself, and that need to be illuminated. Just saying "That's a pseudo-issue" is not of itself therapeutic; it is an aggressive form of the metaphysical disease itself.¹⁹

A much more productive approach may be to take a good look at ourselves and why philosophy interests us, why we ask certain questions and construct the story of our world the way we do.

Putnam says we need to explore the language and metaphysics that lead to scepticism. We should consider alternative possibilities, a way of seeing ourselves and our world that does not leave us feeling 'chafed by our own skins'.²⁰ The discussion leads into Putnam's treatment of incommensurability (referred to as another sort of scepticism), which he goes on to discuss in the context of what Wittgenstein has to say about religious belief, issues considered later in this chapter.²¹

¹⁹ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 20.

²⁰ This phrase is also from Stanley Cavell.

²¹ This forms an important section of Putnam's 1990 Gifford Lectures delivered in St. Andrews, published as *Renewing Philosophy*.

3.2 Craving for Objectivity

Putnam says it is the result of our living in the post-Enlightenment world, of being modernists, that we like to think that “in broad outlines we *know* what’s what.”²² It helps our ‘intellectual confidence’ to picture the world in a particular way. Putnam provides an anecdote to show how deep this may run. He recalls a remark made to him by a hostess at a dinner party he once attended, to the effect that someone with faith (and a religious fundamentalist in particular) has a ‘consolation’ about how the world is (its various sufferings, etc.) that is not available to ‘we’ secular intellectuals. *We* remain unconsolated because “science has taught us that the universe is an uncaring machine.”²³ Putnam, of course, objected to this eighteenth-century view of science, but goes onto say that he was struck by the fact that, later, the hostess’s remark was itself described as “religious”. He says “it *was* a religious remark, if religion embraces one’s ultimate view of the universe as a whole in its moral aspect; and what my hostess was claiming was that science has delivered a new, if depressing, revelation.”²⁴ That we may want to think that such a ‘revelation’ is obviously right is interesting, says Putnam. It suggests that, although this ‘scientific’ view of the universe and our place in it is depressing, we (as sophisticated modern thinkers) rush to embrace it because “at least it is a *demythologizing* revelation.”²⁵ At least, this implies, we have grown out of being

²² Putnam, *RHF*, p. 136.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 135.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 136.

superstitious savages. We may be without consolation but we have got a few things *right*. Putnam says this way of thinking is simply vanity - we need to get over this sort of "intellectual *hubris*" and perhaps be able to recover a sense of mystery.²⁶

However, when our modern confidence is dented (perhaps by our realisation that science is not as neutral as we first thought, that it too contains values and interests) there is unfortunately room for scepticism to come in. Putnam claims that "something in us both craves more than we can possibly have and flees from even the certainty that we do have."²⁷ And scepticism is not a problem that will easily go away. He goes on to point out that,

It is not that relativism and scepticism are unrefutable. Relativism and scepticism are all too easily refutable when they are stated as positions; but they never die, because the attitude of alienation from the world and from the community is not just a theory, and cannot be overcome by purely intellectual argument.²⁸

Putnam says we can only guess at the roots of our sceptical fears. Some may derive from deeply felt existential problems, for example, the difficulty we may find understanding those close to us, or feeling that we are misunderstood by

²⁶ Ibid. p. 140.

²⁷ Putnam, *RP*, p. 178.

²⁸ Ibid.

them.²⁹ This leads us to sceptical worries and also invokes the idea of incommensurability, that the language we use is opaque to others.

In metaphysics as well, Putnam says, philosophers too can easily acquire a kind of ‘*ontological angst*’. This is the sceptical worry that leads to an antirealist interpretation of the world. Putnam summarises the situation:

The writings of contemporary philosophers on ontological questions ... have undermined our confidence in the notion of an object and have caused us to see reference itself as relative to a scheme of interpretation. With reference indeterminate, and with our capacity to relate thought and object directly banished to the status of a “mystery act”, the very category of an object has begun to crumble for contemporary thought.³⁰

A knock-on effect of this has been, for some thinkers, the undermining of the whole concept of interpretation. This is because there are now no ‘discourse-independent’ objects. However, Putnam believes that this ignores the fact that the idea of interpretation as involving “correlation with objects in themselves” is not the *only* idea of interpretation we can use.³¹ Discourse can be related directly to discourse; commentaries on discourse are possible. Putnam says that he “has been defending common-sense realism: the realism that says that mountains and stars are not created by language and thought, and yet can be described by language and thought.”³² This ‘common sense’ realism is not the same as metaphysical realism

²⁹ Putnam *RHF*, pp. 120-1. Putnam comments on what psychoanalysts refer to as ‘fusional’ relationships and their desirability. However, he dryly suggests that as we get older we may well be tempted to see separateness as “a blessing as well as a curse”! (Ibid.)

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Putnam, *W&L*, p. 303.

(it does not require all the extra 'machinery'), and avoids going down the same path as Rorty - denying the possibility of representing a world external to language. The ways we talk can be rough and ready but it is possible, without requiring the notion of 'objects in themselves' to provide mediation for otherwise incommensurable interpretations.³³

So we have a psychological longing for certainty that throws up philosophical problems. Yet, as we have seen, absolute certainty and exactitude are not what we may most often deal with. Putnam says you do not have to become a relativist just because you think realist metaphysics or foundational epistemology have failed. What has been missed, as we saw in Chapter Two, is the simple fact that not all types of 'knowledge' or 'explanation' should be considered in the same way. We do not always need precision. Different pieces of information (facts) require different kinds of evidence - or indeed, no evidence. As we saw, there are facts where it would be strange to ask if they were 'grounded' or not. We get by remarkably well on incomplete knowledge and contingent truth.

This point has been made before by philosophers, notably the so-called 'ordinary language' philosophers such as J. L. Austin.³⁴ In the posthumous collection of lecture notes that make up *Sense and Sensibilia*, Austin notes that "The pursuit of the incorrigible is one of the most venerable bugbears in the history of

³³ Putnam *RHF*, p. 122.

³⁴ Although J. L. Austin is the 'ordinary language' philosopher *par excellence*, the term is also often used to refer to Wittgenstein.

philosophy.”³⁵ He remarks that it has many sources and forms. It can be a search for what is always true (as in Plato) or a desire to be absolutely certain and to seek that which cannot be doubted (as in Descartes). Austin’s lectures are an evaluation of the problem in an epistemological context - the Cartesian search for the foundations of knowledge. Putnam also quotes Austin : “Enough is enough, enough isn’t everything”.³⁶ Somewhat earlier in the history of philosophy, Aristotle also says that,

... we must be content if we attain as high a degree of certainty as the matter admits. The same accuracy or finish is not to be looked for in all discussions ... It is the mark of an educated mind to expect that amount of exactness in each kind which the nature of the subject admits.³⁷

We look at the context to be able to judge what is required. Putnam says we develop *practices* of interpretation. These practices “may be context-sensitive and interest-relative, but there is, given enough context, given, as Wittgenstein says, the language in place, such a thing as *getting it right* and *getting it wrong*.”³⁸ What Putnam is saying is that it (obviously) is not the case that we can provide *just any* interpretation. So it is neither that ‘anything goes’, nor that we (through lack of certainty) can say nothing. These alternatives are equally incoherent.

It is clear, however, that Putnam is again worried about the *ethical* implications of relativism. He says that “what is better and what is worse to say about most

³⁵ J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, Oxford 1962, p. 104.

³⁶ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 121.

³⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (109 46) I, iii, 3-4.

³⁸ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 122.

questions of real human concern is not just a matter of *opinion*" and goes on to assert that

Recognising that this is so is the essential price of admission to the community of sanity. If this has become obscured it is in part because the tides of philosophical theory have swept so high around the words *subjective* and *objective*.³⁹

As we have seen, and like Wittgenstein before him, Putnam is claiming that we have lost some of our ordinary use of such words. They start to carry an awful lot of philosophical baggage. (We perhaps need to be able to talk about 'objectivity with a small "o"'.) And this idea brings us back full circle to talk of 'limits'. That is, this philosophical baggage leads us to think that *there is something we cannot do*. What this is (that which we cannot do) can be characterised in different ways: have a God's Eye View; go beyond the limits of language; know other minds, etc. Putnam's insight is also found in Wittgenstein, who also sees it as a problem. Wittgenstein says "The great difficulty here is not to represent the matter as if there were something one *couldn't* do."⁴⁰

Putnam agrees with Wittgenstein and says he no longer wants to talk of not being able to do something, to talk of *impossibility*, and criticises some of his own earlier pronouncements which fell into this sort of category. For example, he refers to his sections in *Reason, Truth and History* where he speaks of a God's Eye View as

³⁹ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 114.

⁴⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 374.

being impossible. He would rather now say that such a concept is *unintelligible*.

We just cannot make any sense of it. John Haldane points out that Putnam

... does not believe these problems can be left behind, for they are expressions of the human desire to give systematic formulation to thought, part of that craving for general and stable truths that was first voiced by Socrates. Such a need is not something that will go away and nor is it something from which philosophers should try to distance themselves.⁴¹

Putnam criticises Rorty for his dismissal of philosophical problems by talking of impossibilities. Such talk leads us to feel trapped, and in particular (a favourite amongst the deconstructivist philosophers), trapped by language itself. Putnam says that,

I agree with Rorty that we have no access to "unconceptualized reality". ... But it doesn't follow that language and thought do not describe something outside themselves, even if that something can only be described by describing it (that is by employing language and thought); and, as Rorty ought to have seen, the belief that they do plays an essential role *within* language and thought themselves and, more important, within our lives.⁴²

Some disastrous philosophical mistakes have been a result of the craving for objectivity and for certainty. Putnam remarks that

The way in which skepticism is the flip side of a craving for an unintelligible kind of certainty (a senseless craving, one might say, but for all that a deeply human craving) has rarely been more sharply illustrated than by Rorty's complacent willingness to give up on the (platitudinous) idea that language can represent something which is itself outside of language.⁴³

⁴¹ John Haldane, 'Humanism with a Realist Face', p. 22.

⁴² Putnam, *W&L*, p. 297.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

However, Putnam typically still sees the pull of both sides of the argument - the search for certainty, *and* the scepticism which is both its result and opposite. He says "I think there is a Rorty in each of us" and we should reflect carefully on Rorty's position in order to come to a better understanding of ourselves and our metaphysical (and anti-metaphysical) impulses.⁴⁴ This does not mean that we should come to the same conclusions as Rorty - his "recommended response" according to Putnam is "to take a more 'playful' attitude to what we think we know".⁴⁵ Putnam thinks this does not do justice to the world in which we live and move. Rorty would see his own position as pragmatic; but Putnam is the real pragmatist - fallibilism, does not lead to this objectionable view that life (our beliefs, knowledge, actions) is something we can just 'play' at.

3.3 The Incommensurability Thesis

For Putnam, the thesis of incommensurability is "another source of contemporary philosophical scepticism", another way of thinking there is 'something one couldn't do'.⁴⁶ He points out that the thesis has its origin in two places in twentieth century philosophy - Saussurian structural linguistics and the philosophy of science.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 309.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 310.

⁴⁶ Putnam, *RP*, p. 124.

Saussure's project in linguistics was the attempt to describe language completely as a system of differences.⁴⁷ Saussure's work, as ground-breaking as it was, was very much a continuation of nineteenth century comparative philology - a thorough empirical study of the structure and history of languages. His system was based on the binary structure evident in phonemics. That is, phonemes, for example, are only (and can only be) defined in terms of contrasting phonemes. Saussure proposed that the theory is enlarged to account for semantic units as well. Whole languages, however, do not fit into such a system of contrasts, and different languages can provide entirely different systems of phonemic, syntactic and semantic contrasts. So, it is very easy to conclude that "meanings are parochial to languages."⁴⁸ By this he means that the meaning of a 'sign' (word or text) is not separable from that particular sign (i.e., within a particular language).

However, Putnam himself thinks we *can* keep the concept of 'sameness of meaning' across languages, although we are not therefore to postulate meanings as a sort of object. 'Meaning the same' cannot possibly be undermined by anything to do with a system of contrasts because language simply does not work that cleanly or systematically. We are not dealing with "some clean mathematical

⁴⁷ See Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, first published Paris, 1916. English translation by Roy Harris, *A Course in General Linguistics*, La Salle, Ind., 1986.

⁴⁸ Putnam, *RP*, p. 125. Putnam goes on to comment on Derrida's adoption and continuation of Saussurian insights: he says that Derrida "fails to notice that a Utopian project lay behind Saussure's way of thinking" (*RP*, p. 126), that is, Saussure's hope for a complete scientific description of language. The collapse of this project undermines Derrida's conclusions.

relation of equivalence or non-equivalence between two systems of contrasts.”⁴⁹

Our conclusion should not be that meanings are “parochial”, but that such contrasts cannot be drawn clearly enough. And Putnam’s point is that this is *all right*:

If people inquire about the meaning of something that someone says, we generally have some idea as to why they are asking and what they are going to do with the answer. Given the context and the interests of the people involved, we can usually come up with a pretty good answer.⁵⁰

He goes on to say that “the kind of ‘sameness of meaning’ we seek in translation [is] an interest-relative (but still quite real) relation, one which involves a normative judgement, a judgement as to what is *reasonable* in the particular case”.⁵¹

We do not have to end up saying that sameness of meaning can only exist in the impossible case where two language systems are isomorphic.

The notion of ‘sameness of meaning’ is also at the heart of one of the other sources of the thesis of incommensurability Putnam identifies: the philosophy of science. As found in both Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and Paul Feyerabend’s *Against Method*, Putnam says the incommensurability thesis is the claim that “terms used in another culture, say, the term ‘temperature’ as used by a seventeenth-century scientist, cannot be equated in meaning or reference with any terms or expressions *we* possess.”⁵² Kuhn’s contention is that, for example,

⁴⁹ Putnam, *RP*, p. 127.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Putnam, *RTH*, p. 114.

Newtonian science and Einsteinian science are so different that it is the case that they actually describe different worlds.

Putnam says that *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* “appalled most philosophers of science” when it first appeared because it could obviously undermine the notion of scientific progress.⁵³ Progress is replaced by arbitrary, unpredictable jumps from one incommensurable scientific ‘language’ or ‘paradigm’ to another (for example, from the Newtonian to the Einsteinian ‘paradigm’). This view of science also means the disappearance of the idea of scientific *convergence* (building on theories). The emphasis on the impossibility of translation has made our language itself seem somehow fraudulent in its claims to clarity and objectivity, and in many ways has undermined our whole concept of rationality. Of course, as we saw in Chapter One, these ideas have had a considerable influence well outside the sphere of the philosophy of science. (George Lindbeck cites Kuhnian philosophy of science as one of the influences on his formulation of ‘postliberal’ theology.)

Putnam does say that he sees good things in much of Kuhn’s work and also comments that Kuhn has modified certain of his views since the publication of *The*

⁵³ Ibid., p. 113.

Structure of Scientific Revolutions.⁵⁴ However, he criticises Feyerabend (and Michel Foucault too) for continuing down what he sees as an 'extremist' line.⁵⁵

Putnam says that if the incommensurability thesis, as it is defined above, was true then translation would be impossible. Indeed any sort of linguistic interpretation would fail. Putnam claims that, "if we cannot interpret organisms' noises at all, then we have no grounds for regarding them as *thinkers*, *speakers*, or even *persons*."⁵⁶ This is (and Putnam points this out himself) a transcendental argument. The fact is we *are* able to make sense of these things because we have a human context, and therefore our concepts cannot be incommensurable.

Putnam thinks the thesis of incommensurability is particularly untenable in the light of the work on translation done in the philosophy of language by both Quine and Davidson. Putnam says that,

Once it is conceded that we can find a translation scheme which 'works' in the case of a seventeenth-century text, at least in the context fixed by our interests and the use to which the translation will be put, what sense does it have *in that context* to say that the translation does not 'really' capture the sense or reference of the original?⁵⁷

Exact sameness of meaning in the sense of having identified *the* meaning (i.e. synonymy) is not the issue. It is intelligibility that matters.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 126. Portions of this chapter of *RTH* also appear in 'Philosophers and human understanding' in Putnam's *Realism and Reason*.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 114.

⁵⁷ Putnam, *RTH*, p. 116.

This is what informs the various ‘principles of charity’ which have been formulated in linguistics and the philosophy of language.⁵⁸ We act on the principle that we (pretty much and for most of the time) will be able to understand other people. This is because, amongst other things, we assume they are not deliberately leading us astray. Putnam says, “It is a constitutive fact about human experience in a world of different cultures ... that we are ... able to interpret one another’s beliefs, desires, and utterances so that it all makes some kind of *sense*.”⁵⁹

Putnam does not deny that there may be distinct and severe problems in translation and understanding in particular cases. He is not putting forward a case for any naive homogeneity of languages and cultures. He does not desire a world where we all speak Esperanto.⁶⁰ Diversity is a fact, and one which may enrich our lives if we allow it to. What Putnam does not want to do, however, is rush from the undoubted difficulty of understanding in some cases, to a thesis which says languages and cultures are incommensurable.

Paul Feyerabend responds to Putnam’s attack on incommensurability in *Farewell to Reason*.⁶¹ For a start, he denies that the incommensurability thesis is self-refuting, and also claims that Putnam’s definition of incommensurability (which is

⁵⁸ See for example, H. P. Grice, and Donald Davidson.

⁵⁹ Putnam, *RTH*, p. 117.

⁶⁰ Putnam, *W&L*, p. 185.

⁶¹ Paul Feyerabend, *Farewell to Reason*, London and New York 1987. Chapter 10. He is responding to the appropriate material in *RTH*.

obviously self-refuting) is not quite the same as the one he actually offers. He says “mere difference of meanings does not yet lead to incommensurability in my sense.” He goes on to say that “incommensurable languages (theories, points of view) are not completely disconnected - there exists a subtle and interesting relation between their conditions of meaningfulness.”⁶²

Feyerabend summarises Putnam’s conclusions in *Reason, Truth and History* as being that, if the thesis is true, (1) translation will be impossible; (2) members of other cultures would seem to us simply as animals making noises (Putnam’s point about our not being able to recognise them as speakers or persons); and, (3) that it is incoherent to say, for example, that Galileo had incommensurable notions and then to go on and discuss them.

Feyerabend says these conclusions rest on two assumptions: firstly, that “understanding foreign concepts (foreign cultures) requires translation” and, secondly, “a successful translation does not change the translating language”.⁶³ Neither of these assumptions is correct, according to Feyerabend. He claims we can learn a language from scratch and not by way of our native tongue, that is not via translation. He also says we are able to amend our native language to accommodate new (and ‘alien’) concepts.

⁶² Ibid., p. 272.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 266.

Feyerabend's claim about language learning is referred to favourably by John Milbank during his discussion of relativism in *Theology and Social Theory*. Milbank says that "to negotiate 'the Other', one can bypass the moment of translation altogether - were this not so, infants would never learn their native tongue."⁶⁴ Feyerabend says that "speaking a language goes through stages where speaking indeed amounts to [only] 'making noises'."⁶⁵ He says children learn by attending to noise which gradually becomes meaningful to them. He says "St. Augustine advised parsons to teach the formulae of the faith by rote adding that their sense would emerge as a result of prolonged use within a rich, eventful and pious life."⁶⁶

However, the issue is not as clear-cut as Feyerabend and Milbank suggest. While it is certainly true that, as infants, we do not learn our native tongue through translation, learning our native tongue is a *unique event*. We do not learn another language *ever* in exactly the same way we learn our own.⁶⁷ It is therefore a separate issue (and one where the onus is on Feyerabend) to show that there is *no* translation necessary in the learning of a second language. Since language learning does also involve interpretation, the notions of interpretation and translation seem to be very much interconnected.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 341.

⁶⁵ Feyerabend, *FR*, p. 270.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Tellingly, this process is normally referred to - in cognitive science and linguistics - as language *acquisition* and not language *learning*.

Ernest Gellner, as we saw in Chapter One, has little sympathy with postmodern thinkers like Feyerabend. He thinks recent anthropology exaggerates the difficulties involved in understanding 'the Other' (although there may be many complex difficulties in specific instances). This is significant because of the influence that this recent trend in anthropology has had on both philosophy and theology. He says that a generation of anthropologists has been encouraged "to parade their real or invented inner qualms and paralysis, using the invocation of the epistemological doubt and cramp as a justification of utmost obscurity and subjectivism."⁶⁸ He goes on:

They agonise so much about their inability to know themselves and the Other ... that they no longer need to trouble too much about the Other. If everything in the world is fragmented and multiform, nothing really resembles anything else, ..., and no one can communicate, what is there to do other than express the anguish engendered by this situation in impenetrable prose?⁶⁹

Gellner clearly sees much of this type of output as being part of a *political* agenda (especially in America).

Putnam also emphasises this political element in his discussion of what he sees as the extremism of Foucault and Feyerabend. He says,

There is something political in their minds: both Feyerabend and Foucault link our present institutionalized criteria of rationality with capitalism, exploitation, and even sexual repression. Clearly there are many divergent reasons why people are attracted to extreme relativism today, the idea

⁶⁸ Gellner, p. 45.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

that all existing institutions and traditions are bad being one of them.⁷⁰

Again we see the downside of the craving for objectivity - an epistemological angst about other cultures leading to a scepticism and suspicion about both these and also our own.⁷¹

There is an obvious connection too between incommensurability and Wittgenstein's notion of 'language-games'. This will be considered in the next section where I will look in more depth at an example of what easily could be considered an incommensurable language-game - religious discourse. They will also be further considered in Part Two of this thesis as part of an analysis of George Lindbeck's postliberal theology where these ideas have had a considerable influence.

Incommensurability is a complex issue, which still requires much more exploration and of a more level-headed kind than has often been the case. As was suggested in chapter One, theologians in particular have been too quick to pick up on these issues in too uncritical a manner. For them the sort of relativism which promotes the existence incommensurable languages, has come as something of a

⁷⁰ Putnam, *RTH*, p. 126

⁷¹ Another difficulty here is, of course, the attempt to talk about 'cultures' as a whole. It is not obvious that we can do this. As a definition 'culture' is vague and amorphous (as the cultures themselves tend to be). This will be discussed in more detail as we look at the work of George Lindbeck in the following chapters. Putnam thinks relativism will undermine the whole concept of culture. He asks: "does every person have his or her own 'idioculture,' just as every person has his or her own idiolect? How many 'cultures' are there in any one country in the world today?" (*RHF*, p. 139)

relief (and we shall see this in more detail in the later consideration of postliberal theology). These theologians no longer need to substantiate their claims in terms acceptable to everyone else. In fact, their claims need not be acceptable to *anyone* else.

Putnam is clear that this view is, in the end, incoherent. It is part of the search for certainty (local criteria being all that we can be really sure of). It is true that Putnam is guilty on some occasions of stating his opponents' position in a less than sympathetic way. Rorty refers to Putnam's definition of the incommensurability thesis as easily "brushed aside".⁷² He says that Putnam's criticisms of the incommensurability thesis "is destructive of, at most, some incautious passages in some early writings by Feyerabend."⁷³ Rorty is, however, being disingenuous in suggesting that Feyerabend substantially modified his views and somehow became a more 'cautious' writer. The idea of separate, incommensurable 'texts', languages and cultures is key to Feyerabend's thought.

There is still an ethical dimension for Putnam, though, which I think may be the reason for his occasional understating of his philosophical opponents' views. He does not want ethical language to be devalued. For him ethical assertions are (to some degree or other) normative and universal. As a result you simply cannot characterise taking a moral position as Feyerabend does, that is, as singing a "moral

⁷² Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 25.

⁷³ Ibid.

aria.” Feyerabend says “On the one hand the matter seem[s] quite idiotic - I sing my aria, the Nazi sings his - now what?”⁷⁴ In contrast, for Putnam, as we have seen, the notions of ‘better’ and ‘worse’ are not ones that we are actually able to give up.

3.4 Wittgenstein and Religious Belief

The issue of incommensurability is one of the many issues that Putnam tackles in his 1990 Gifford Lectures, and here he discusses it in the light of what Wittgenstein says about the nature of religious belief.⁷⁵ As we have seen, it is a typical strategy of Putnam’s to look at a serious philosophical issue by reading what one of his philosophical ‘heroes’ says about it. Of course, he thinks there is good reason for such a strategy. He says,

The only way I know of pointing to a better way in philosophy is to engage in a certain kind of reading, a reading of the work of some philosophers who, in spite of their mistakes and their flaws ... point the way toward and exemplify the possibility of philosophical reflection on our lives and language that is neither frivolously sceptical nor absurdly metaphysical, neither fantastic parascience nor

⁷⁴ Feyerabend, p. 313.

⁷⁵ These lectures are dated variously: the dust jacket of *Renewing Philosophy* (Harvard University Press) says they were presented in 1989; Clark and Hale in *Reading Putnam* (whose subject matter is the content of a conference held in St. Andrews just subsequent to the Gifford Lectures) say 1990, as does Putnam himself; and the review in the *Journal of Philosophy* by Robert Brandom says 1991! The lectures were in fact presented in 1990. Wittgenstein’s remarks are found in: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Ed.) Cyril Barrett, Oxford 1966.

fantastic parapolitics, but serious and fundamentally honest reflection of the most difficult kind.⁷⁶

Similarly, later on in *Renewing Philosophy*, where he is discussing Dewey's political philosophy, Putnam claims that, for example,

... Dewey at his best and Wittgenstein at his best illustrate how philosophical reflection which is completely honest can unsettle our prejudices and our pet convictions and our blind spots without flashy claims to "deconstruct" truth itself or the world itself.⁷⁷

Putnam wants to discuss Wittgenstein in relation to incommensurability because, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, a standard interpretation of Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language is that he is propounding some version of the incommensurability thesis. Putnam disagrees with this interpretation and he thinks that he can provide strong textual evidence to support his view.

Suspensions of incommensurability in Wittgenstein are, of course, tied up to a large degree with his notion of language games. (This notion was discussed briefly in Chapter One where I considered it specifically in relation to how it has been appropriated by theologians. I will look at language games again in my discussion of George Lindbeck's postliberal theology in the second part of this thesis.) In its basic form the view is that religious language can be construed as a language game, something which has its own grammatical rules and specialised vocabulary, logically distinct from any other language game.

⁷⁶ Putnam, *RP*, p. 141.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

As we saw in Chapter One, despite the fact that the interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophy as putting forward a version of incommensurability is widespread, some writers in the philosophy of religion dissent from this view. These writers include D. Z. Phillips and Fergus Kerr. Kerr says "The notion that any language-game functions in isolation from others has no basis in Wittgenstein's work."⁷⁸ However, it continues to be widespread not only because many theologians seem not to have become familiar with the primary texts, but also because it suits certain types of theology to characterise their subject as autonomous, as somehow 'private' and free from the possibility of external criticism. That religious discourse and theology is characterised this way is, of course, also used as a stick to beat it: that is, it can be the target for accusations of irrelevance.

Putnam starts his look at the textual evidence by exploring what Wittgenstein says about the sort of language a religious believer may use. Wittgenstein wants to contrast how words may mean something (slightly or even completely) different depending on the context of their use. Wittgenstein says, "Take two people, one of whom talks of his behaviour and of what happens to him in terms of retribution, the other one does not. These people think entirely differently. Yet so far you can't say they believe different things."⁷⁹ The people in Wittgenstein's

⁷⁸ Kerr, p. 31.

⁷⁹ Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, p. 55.

example do not contradict each other because they have different ideas: he thinks they 'talk past' each other. Putnam explains that

Wittgenstein's picture is not that the believer makes a claim and the atheist asserts its negation. It is as if religious discourse were somehow incommensurable ... But there are many theories of incommensurability, and the problem is to decide in what way Wittgenstein means to deny the commensurability or homophony of religious and non-religious discourse.⁸⁰

In the material collected in *Lectures and Conversations*, Wittgenstein tries to bring out certain important contrasts concerning how 'close' in meaning we would consider certain statements by different people. He says,

Suppose someone were a believer and said: "I believe in a Last Judgement," and I said: "Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly." You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said "There is a German aeroplane overhead," and I said: "Possibly. I'm not so sure," you'd say we were fairly near.⁸¹

As Putnam points out, Wittgenstein is not saying that a non-believer (perhaps on the verge of a religious conversion) could not muse or reflect on the possibility of a last judgement. But the musing would not be the same type as in the case of the German 'plane. The belief of the religious person is characterised by what Wittgenstein sees as its 'unshakeable' nature. This is something that Wittgenstein picks up from the theology of Kierkegaard. This unshakeability does not mean

⁸⁰ Putnam, *RP*, p. 143.

⁸¹ Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, p. 53.

that the belief is doubt-free. Putnam says that “Kierkegaard spoke of faith as a state to be repeatedly reentered”.⁸²

Wittgenstein also says that religious belief has a regulatory nature. This has the effect of making it quite different from an empirical belief. Putnam says

What Wittgenstein means to bring out ... is that one's life may be organized by very different pictures. And he means to suggest that religion has more to do with the kind of picture that one allows to organize one's life than it does with expressions of belief.⁸³

In *Words and Life*, Putnam discusses the sort of ‘picture’ used by the metaphysical realist and criticises it along Wittgensteinian lines. As we saw above, Wittgenstein says that we can become influenced by a ‘picture’, one way of looking at things, which stops us seeing other ways of looking. So he asks, “Was not Wittgenstein telling us to reject *all* pictures in philosophy?”⁸⁴ However, this is not what Wittgenstein is saying. Rather, Putnam rightly points out that Wittgenstein is more concerned to say simply that it just *is the case* that we use pictures. It is the particular picture in a particular context, and the use that is made of it, that can be good or bad. As Putnam himself says, “there are pictures and pictures”.⁸⁵

Putnam tries to analyse in more detail the different interpretations that are possible of what Wittgenstein is saying about religious belief. The first

⁸² Putnam, *RP*, p. 145.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁸⁴ Putnam, *W&L*, p. 276.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

interpretation is the one that has been already mentioned, that Wittgenstein is going down the road of incommensurability. A second common interpretation is that Wittgenstein is claiming that religious discourse is solely an expression of emotions or attitude.⁸⁶ Putnam says a third interpretation is possible where Wittgenstein is taken to be saying that religious language is 'non-cognitive'. (These interpretations are obviously interconnected.)

Putnam wants to say that Wittgenstein would regard "the first as a useless thing to say, and the second and third as simply wrong."⁸⁷ More broadly, then, "Wittgenstein is not saying one of the standard things about religious language."⁸⁸ Putnam thinks that Wittgenstein is claiming that religious language "can only be understood in any depth only by understanding the form of life to which it belongs. What characterizes that form of life is not the expressions of belief that accompany it, but a way ... of living one's life, of regulating all of one's decisions."⁸⁹ Understanding a religious person means understanding how they live; to see them as a *person*.

For all that, could religious language not still be considered 'non-cognitive' in Wittgenstein's account? Putnam points out that Wittgenstein's talk of the religious person 'using a picture' could lead people to suspect this. However, this

⁸⁶ This view is often wrongly attributed to D. Z. Phillips.

⁸⁷ Putnam, *RP*, p. 148.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.154

is a point Wittgenstein answers directly in the *Lectures and Conversations*. What is important is what *conclusions* will be drawn from the picture. Wittgenstein says he does not want to say anything the religious believer would not say himself. Different pictures will have different weight, different conclusions. Wittgenstein's example is of someone talking about the 'eye' of God.⁹⁰ This is obviously a picture that a believer can have. But Wittgenstein says it would be wrong to say that a believer would conclude that it is equally possible to start to talk about the *eyebrows* of God! Such an idea is ridiculous; it is not how the grammar of 'God' works.

Still, does 'non-cognitive' simply mean 'does not refer'? Putnam discusses Wittgenstein's "digression" in *the Lectures* about (as an example) referring to his brother who lived in America in the light of causal theories of reference developed after Wittgenstein died.⁹¹ Putnam believes Wittgenstein's account of language still undermines these theories of reference. He says, "Referring ... is using words in a certain way."⁹² Putnam notes that in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein attacks the view that we can only use a word if we have a necessary and sufficient condition for its application. What we have are some paradigms. We should remember that 'referring' is a family resemblance word: referring uses do not have an *essence*. Putnam goes on:

⁹⁰ Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, p. 71.

⁹¹ Putnam is thinking about the work done by Fodor and Kripke in particular.

⁹² Putnam, *RP*, p. 165.

... just as I have suggested that Wittgenstein would not have regarded talk of incommensurability as helpful, and would not have regarded talk of certain discourses being “cognitive” and other discourses being “non-cognitive” as helpful, I suggest that he would not have regarded the questions to whether religious language *refers* as helpful either. (He speaks of a “muddle”.) The use of religious language is both like and unlike ordinary cases of reference: but to as whether it is “really” reference or “not really” reference is to be in a muddle.⁹³

But has enough been said to allay charges of incommensurability? As Putnam asks, “Has Wittgenstein simply immunized religious language from all criticism?”⁹⁴

Putnam again refers to the available texts to try to resolve the issue. He claims that religious belief is not made immune from criticism because Wittgenstein presents himself as a non-believer, as in fact, *critical* of religious beliefs. Wittgenstein talks about the possibility of “combating” elements of another culture, combating a language game.⁹⁵ For example, Wittgenstein says that deciding something by ordeal by fire is “absurd”.⁹⁶ However, he also says that it is not always possible for us to give *reasons* for saying something is wrong. Wittgenstein says here that “If we call this ‘wrong’ aren’t we using our language game as a base from which to *combat* theirs?”⁹⁷ He goes on to say “I give him *reasons*? Certainly, but how far do they go?”⁹⁸ Wittgenstein talks about “slogans” that might be used to support a position rather than reasons.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 168.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 168.

⁹⁵ In considering Wittgenstein’s arguments Putnam draws together material not only from the *Lectures and Conversations*, but also Wittgenstein’s remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough* and passages in *On Certainty*.

⁹⁶ Wittgenstein, OC 605.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 609.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 612.

Putnam admits that these comments of Wittgenstein's could "sound like relativism".⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the fact is that Wittgenstein himself says *he* would combat these things. Putnam claims that in his discussion of reasons (or lack of) Wittgenstein is simply making an empirical point. Putnam says "When we try to argue with, say, the Azande, there are times when we cannot find reasons that are reasons for them."¹⁰⁰ Elsewhere, Putnam also says that "pluralism should not be confused with naïve cultural relativism."¹⁰¹

In *Pragmatism*, too, Putnam briefly considers Wittgenstein's account of religious belief. He explains:

I take Wittgenstein to be saying ... that (1) the possibilities of "external" understanding of a deeply different form of life are extremely limited; and (2) that religious claims are not simply badly formulated "empirical" claims. Yet they are not rejected by Wittgenstein out of hand, as are metaphysical claims. So what is going on? Wittgenstein is urging a certain kind of empathetic understanding.¹⁰²

Putnam says that at bottom, according to Wittgenstein, our language game rests on *trust*.¹⁰³ This refers back to our earlier considerations about the possibility of incommensurable languages and the idea of shared beliefs and practices, and of

⁹⁹ Putnam, *RP*, p. 171.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁰¹ Putnam, *W&L*, p. 193.

¹⁰² Putnam, *Pr.*, p. 50.

¹⁰³ Putnam, *RP*, p. 177. The reference in Wittgenstein is to OC 509.

principles of charity. Putnam says we find these sort of conclusions about what language is like hard to bear. He goes on to comment:

... how we wriggle and turn in search of either a transcendental guarantee or a sceptical escape, is something that Stanley Cavell has traced ... Cavell sees all of Wittgenstein's work as connected with the problematic of scepticism, but scepticism in a very wide sense.¹⁰⁴

This is the link with the 'craving for objectivity' and the sceptical response we saw earlier. Putnam simply says that in our philosophising we need to "accept the world and to acknowledge other people."¹⁰⁵

In a review of *Renewing Philosophy*,¹⁰⁶ Robert Brandom criticises Putnam for being vague in his conclusions. He says he understands what Putnam is trying to do in his discussion of both Wittgenstein and Dewey, philosophers who "take our lives and our practice seriously",¹⁰⁷ contrasting them with contemporary analytic philosophers (who presumably do not). However, Brandom says that Putnam "is cagey about drawing general substantive or even methodological conclusions from them."¹⁰⁸ Brandom suggests that scepticism and relativism (Putnam's great bugbears) could themselves be a result of (specifically contemporary) practice and experience.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 178.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 178.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Brandom, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XCI, No. 3, March 1994.

¹⁰⁷ Putnam, *RP*, p. 135. This recalls Wittgenstein's question, "How can I be a logician if I'm not a human being?" in *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore*, (ed.) G. H. von Wright (with B. F. McGuinness), Oxford, 1974, pp. 57-8.

¹⁰⁸ Brandom, p. 143.

However, this is surely to miss Putnam's point. Putnam explicitly says that the impulses to scepticism and relativism are deep seated, and very human impulses. He says that "some forms of skepticism *matter*."¹⁰⁹ Our language, how we refer to things, our philosophising are tied up completely with who we are in the world - a world made up of our actions, beliefs, and our relations with other people. As part of Putnam's discussion of 'pictures', truth, and reference in *Words and Life*, he claims that,

Regarding my utterances about [for example] Caesar as utterances about a real human being is essential to what Stanley Cavell would call *acknowledging* Caesar. To think "Caesar-talk" as *just* a language game which enables me, let us say, to predict what I will find when I read ancient documents, history books and so on, is not at all the same as acknowledging Caesar as a "fellow passenger to the grave".¹¹⁰

It is important to realise that this sort of relation exists between people who use different language games - for example, the religious believer and the atheist; the Westerner and the member of the Azande tribe.

Putnam also believes we will continue to have sceptical fears. He says, "Being alienated is part of the human condition, and the problem is to learn to live with both alienation and acknowledgement."¹¹¹ Putnam commends Wittgenstein in the *Lectures* because this work demonstrates "how a philosopher can lead us to see our

¹⁰⁹ Putnam, *W&L*, p. 297.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

¹¹¹ Putnam, *RP*, p. 178.

various forms of life differently without being either scientific or irresponsibly metaphysical.”¹¹²

Part Two of this thesis considers the work of George Lindbeck who, we shall see, also claims to have been influenced by Wittgenstein. Like Putnam, Lindbeck too is critical of aspects of ‘modernity’ especially the way that the modern metanarrative tends to subsume all others. We shall see how this influence and these criticisms shape Lindbeck’s ‘postliberal theology’ and assess the value of this particular path in theology.

¹¹² Putnam, *RP*, p. xi.

PART TWO:
RENEWING THEOLOGY

CHAPTER FOUR:

POSTLIBERALISM AND *THE NATURE OF DOCTRINE*

4.1 Introduction

This chapter and the following chapters, all of which make up Part Two of this thesis, are drawn together under the heading of 'Renewing Theology'. This chapter and the next explore a particular attempt to 'renew' theology in the case of 'postliberal' theology. The concluding chapter draws the argument of the thesis to a close regarding its consideration of postliberalism as an option for theology. The final chapter also sketches a possible positive path forward for theology inspired by the repudiation of relativism and scepticism found in Hilary Putnam's 'internal realist' philosophy.

We shall see then, here in Part Two, the recurrence of issues and concerns from Part One of the thesis. These issues have included the contemporary critique of modernism and the possibilities for realism within this critique; the influence of Wittgenstein's later philosophy; and concerns about the incommensurability of languages. These issues will be related more explicitly to theology in this section of the thesis. For example, the critique of modernism is enlarged by George Lindbeck to involve criticism of liberalism's universalist tendencies in theology;

postliberalism criticises a realist ‘propositional’ theology and presents a ‘narrative’ realism; there is a clear influence of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of language on Lindbeck and the whole postliberal project. We shall also explore briefly whether incommensurability in religion (which Lindbeck says is possible) will lead to a sort of fideism.

The present chapter provides an overview of postliberalism, and considers in detail Lindbeck’s ‘cultural-linguistic’ model for theology. This is one based on the sorts of influences from philosophy and social science we looked at in the previous section (Lindbeck refers to “a considerable body of anthropological, sociological, and philosophical literature”¹). He then goes on to compare his model with the other prevailing theological theories of religion and doctrine. Initially this is to explore his view that a cultural-linguistic model will explain ecumenical agreement in a more convincing manner, but he goes on to expand the model testing it against specific doctrines and, in the final chapter of the book, sketches what he thinks a postliberal *theology* would look like.

We have already seen in the Introduction to this thesis why it is that Lindbeck’s contribution deserves particular attention, justified alone by the considerable influence of *The Nature of Doctrine* since its publication. Lindbeck is also open about linking his work directly with ‘postmodernism’. He says when he talks of a

¹ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 17.

postliberal theology, "The type of theology I have in mind could also be called 'postmodern', 'post-expressionist', or 'post-neo-orthodox', but 'postliberal' seems best because what I have in mind postdates the ... liberal method."²

One important point to note is that, given the current pressures within theology and philosophy (some of which we considered in Chapter One), both Lindbeck and Putnam are responding to similar problems. Both are critical of where aspects of modernity have brought us, both critical of overarching metanarratives and any naive realism. The question which will be considered in Part Two of the thesis is whether Lindbeck is successful in securing (as Putnam does) a middle way or whether he becomes trapped in the same sceptical and relativistic problems as Richard Rorty.³

4.2 Postliberal Theology: An Overview

A good introduction to postliberal theology already exists, supplied by William Placher in David Ford's anthology of contemporary theology, *The Modern*

² Ibid., p. 135, note 1. William Placher thinks that Lindbeck's choice of name is "unfortunate". He says, "In the late 1960's when Frei and Lindbeck were developing these ideas, 'postliberal' implied a radical challenge to existing society, but by the time Lindbeck's book appeared in 1984, in an age of Reagan and Thatcher, it sounded as if it meant 'conservative'." (Placher, 'Postliberal Theology' in *The Modern Theologians Vol. II* (ed.) David F. Ford, p. 117.)

³ Lindbeck refers to Rorty on p. 137 of *TND* in a footnote. He praises an aspect of Rorty's work, but is critical due to what he sees as Rorty's tendency towards deconstructivist philosophy.

Theologians Vol. II. In this, Placher immediately notes the centrality of Lindbeck's book. We have already seen in the Introduction to this thesis evidence of how influential Lindbeck's work is considered to be. Here, Placher points out that it has been *The Nature of Doctrine* which has "brought the work of a number of theologians who share at least a 'family resemblance' into focus as a new theological option."⁴ These theologians include Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, Stanley Hauerwas and Ronald Thiemann. The other theologians often included under the 'postliberal' umbrella are: David Kelsey, Bruce Marshall, William Placher and Charles Wood. Most of these theologians have been the product of, or influenced by, the 'Yale School' of theology. In addition, Placher says that "many of the movement's roots lie in the work of Yale theologian H. Richard Niebuhr."⁵ In each there is an emphasis on particularity; and the shaping power of religious communities, texts and traditions.

The concept of 'narrative' is very important. Here, it is Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* which has proved extremely influential.⁶ In his book *Unapologetic Theology*, William Placher says that "Postliberal theology really began with Hans Frei's reflections on biblical hermeneutics."⁷ Frei focused on what a story *means* - not what history it may purport to report nor how it may work

⁴ Placher, 'Postliberal Theology', p.115.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, New Haven, 1974.

⁷ William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation*, Westminster, 1989, p. 161.

symbolically. This emphasis on narrative, according to postliberal theologians, has allowed Christianity to tell its own story again, to find its own authentic voice.

Placher also usefully traces the history of postliberal theology at Yale University. He points out that Yale's starting point in their school of religion has been different historically from other faculties, notably the University of Chicago Faculty of Religion, whose own history owed much to the liberal theology of Schleiermacher and Tillich. David Tracy, whose work we shall consider later, has been a product of the Chicago Divinity School, and provides a useful foil to Lindbeck. Where other universities taught that religion is a universal cultural entity (answering 'general human questions'), the starting point chosen by Yale was the close study of particular traditions. These came to resemble sociological or anthropological studies. Placher says,

A good Lindbeckian, postliberal theologian will ... operate less like a philosophically orientated apologist and more like a sensitive anthropologist, who tries to describe the language and practice of a tribe in terms of how they function in the life of that community and how they shape the way that community sees the world, rather than trying to defend these people's way of talking by the standards of some universal human rationality or experience.⁸

At the same time, Yale also developed a new approach in the area of Biblical hermeneutics, much influenced, as we saw above, by the teaching of Hans Frei.

⁸ Ibid., p. 163.

For postliberal theologians, truth and epistemology do not rest on empirical foundations, verified by observation and personal experience. This obviously goes against the grain of modernism. On the contrary, a major emphasis in postliberal theology is on the illuminating and truth-providing properties of *story*. Religious truth is also not to be redefined, as the liberals do, in terms of the expression of attitudes or emotions. There is also no universal 'religious experience'. Different religious systems are not all answers to the same set of ultimate questions. Postliberals emphasise beliefs which belong to a *community* - religion is not a private experience. Again, this undermines the modern view of the primacy of the individual. George Lindbeck says that "explicit faith is understood, not as expressing or articulating the existential depths, but rather as producing and forming them."⁹

There has been a hostile and worried reaction from some quarters to this new type of theology, including the charges of relativism, fideism and sectarianism. The following description of postliberal theologians by Michael Root caricatures the response:

They [postliberal theologians] reject the very enterprise of a systematic and comprehensive grounding of the truth of the Christian message. They seem to be relativists or, even worse, "Barthian confessionalists". Nevertheless this group can be found in the very heart of American academia, Yale and Emersonian Harvard. Are the barbarians within the gates? Is "postliberal" theology a Trojan horse for anything-goes irrationalism?¹⁰

⁹ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 60.

¹⁰ Michael Root, 'Truth, Relativism and Postliberal Theology', *dialog*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Summer 1986, p. 175.

These criticisms, as we shall see, result from (amongst other things) postliberalism's concern with particularity, and the idea, taken from the social sciences, that communities *create* beliefs. I will explore these criticisms in detail in the following sections, looking more closely at Lindbeck's text.

But why has this distinctive type of theology, with this sort of background, emerged? It is clear that postliberalism is in many ways a reaction against liberal theology. Liberal theologians appeal to universal norms; postliberals emphasise particular traditions. Liberals emphasise the individual (existential); postliberals the social. Lindbeck himself says that the emphases and concerns of postliberalism go against the modern grain and quite deliberately so. (He says that this probably explains its lack of appeal!)

One of the things opposed is modernity's emphasis on instrumentalism. Thus, William Placher says postliberalism is a good antidote for *functionalism* in modern religion. This is where religion (any of the religions) is seen as a means to an end and, in point of fact, the *same* end ultimately. Which religion you choose is based on personality and preference: the individual can be seen as making a 'lifestyle' choice in much the same way as people decide between differing brands of washing powder.¹¹

¹¹ In fact, as we have already noted in Chapter One, Peter Berger very much sees the modern expressions of religion as some type of consumerism. D. Z. Phillips says Lindbeck is too

Being able to provide an alternative to liberal theology is seen by postliberal theologians as a very necessary move.¹² They believe that the expression and claims of particular faiths were becoming diluted as they tried to redefine themselves in the light of contemporary language and culture. George Lindbeck says that the Christian message "is not to be subsumed under some more comprehensive, integrated structure of interpretation."¹³ Postliberal theology wants Christian theology (and it is from this tradition that most of them speak) to be distinctive, true to itself. Placher says that starting with universal public criteria, as a theologian from the liberal tradition like David Tracy explicitly does, "means shaping one's faith to the needs, desires, and concerns of contemporary culture - and that inevitably distorts the faith."¹⁴ Instead, what should happen is that the *faith* should be the shaping influence. Jeffrey Stout concurs, saying that there "is no more certain way for theology to lose its voice than to imitate that of another."¹⁵ (A major criticism of liberalism is, of course, that it imitates the voice of *philosophy*.) Stout goes on to claim that,

influenced by Berger. See Phillips, 'Lindbeck's Audience', *Modern Theology*, Vol. 4, No. 2, January 1988, p. 152.

¹² One of the many links between postliberals and Barth is this fear and dislike of what is seen as liberal accommodation to wider culture and society. Barth's historical context is seen as a warning. Stanley Hauerwas refers to Nazi Germany saying, "Here the church was quite willing to 'serve the world'. The capitulation of the church before Nazism ... sends a chill down the spine of today's church." (*Resident Aliens*, Nashville, 1989, p.43) He then cites the example of the confessing church's resistance and asks "Was this church being 'liberal' or 'conservative', 'sectarian' or 'tribal' when it said no to Hitler?"

¹³ Root, p.177. See also Hans Frei *Types of Christian Theology*, (eds.) Hunsinger and Placher, Yale, 1992, p. 156.

¹⁴ Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, p. 160.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, Cambridge, 1988, p. 165.

Serious conversation with theology will be greatly limited if the voice of theology is not recognisably theological. Conversation partners must remain distinctive enough to be identified, to be needed. They must be able to clarify the difference their outlook makes ...¹⁶

There is however, as we have seen, a claimed philosophical backing for *postliberalism*. Placher admits that it seems contradictory for postliberals like himself to be criticising philosophical foundations, and at the same time, to draw support from philosophy for a particular approach. He says that this can be defended on the grounds that theology and philosophy often grapple with similar issues. They can learn from each other's experience and be influenced to go down a particular path. He also says that his claims for theological methodology do not *depend* for their validity on philosophy.

The philosophical backing for postliberalism, perhaps surprisingly considering the criticisms levelled against postliberal theologians for perceived relativism, actually comes in a large part from modern analytical philosophy, and not directly from continental philosophy.¹⁷ For example, Hans Frei cites Gilbert Ryle,¹⁸ Lindbeck refers to Wittgenstein and Kuhn; and Bruce Marshall appropriates Donald Davidson's philosophy of language.

¹⁶ Stout, p. 184.

¹⁷ See Lindbeck's long footnote on Derrida, *TND*, p.136.

¹⁸ Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, p. vii.

However, in practice it is not a simple matter to assess the influence of philosophy on postliberal theology. It goes beyond name-dropping for intellectual effect (one only needs to read Marshall's forbiddingly intelligent analysis of Davidson to appreciate this). Yet it is still possible (for reasons we considered in Chapter One) to see postliberalism as picking up on what might be considered contemporary philosophical *fashion*, and for a species of theology which is so critical of liberalism's supposed easy appropriation of contemporary culture and thought, this is still ironic.

That said, there are reasons enough why picking up these strands in philosophy is helpful for a theological programme. On a very basic level, postliberal theologians might be tempted to say that it allows theology to be done at all! There is a felt relief from leaving liberal apologetics behind. As they see things, these theologians are glad not to have to be forever articulating what they have to say in terms that are acceptable to the *non-believer*.

These theologians believe that picking up these philosophical strands also allows theology to engage in the same sort of intellectual conversation as other disciplines. It provides an extra chance of being taken seriously. There is also another more obviously pragmatic reason. Theology can adopt a sociological or anthropological vocabulary and approach when describing religious practice because such a vocabulary and approach has worked well elsewhere. It can adopt literary critical techniques when analysing the biblical texts because these techniques have proven

fruitful in these other areas. All this helps theology say that it is *relevant*, that it can function in a 'postmodern' world as well as anyone else can. However postliberal theologians are clear that they use these techniques on their own terms; theology must remain distinctive.

4.3 Lindbeck's *Cultural-Linguistic* Model

In the Foreword to *The Nature of Doctrine*, George Lindbeck explicitly admits that his definition of postliberal theology "derives from philosophical and social scientific approaches."¹⁹ He thinks these approaches have advantages for the study and description of religion and also for ecumenism and theology.²⁰ As part of this, postliberal theology will help form a new "conceptualization of doctrine" which he says should prove fruitful for these purposes.

Lindbeck is led towards adopting a new way of looking at doctrine by his long involvement in ecumenical debate. He claims that from his twenty-five year experience of such debate, and from the fact of achieved ecumenical agreement, doctrines must actually function quite differently from the way they are commonly conceived. He points out that religious doctrines "do not behave the

¹⁹ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 7. The people Lindbeck explicitly mentions are: Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Wittgenstein, Winch, Geertz, Berger, Smart and Christian.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

way they should, given our customary suppositions about the kinds of things they are.”²¹ He says,

We are often unable, for example, to specify the criteria we implicitly employ when we say that some changes are faithful to doctrinal tradition and others unfaithful, or some doctrinal differences are church-dividing and others not... We clearly need new and better ways of understanding their nature and function.²²

Yet doctrinal agreement does happen. Lindbeck calls doctrinal agreement a “strange combination of constancy and change, unity and diversity.”²³ The question is, how can we make this sort of agreement intelligible? Lindbeck agrees that it can seem strange to hear that agreement on various subjects (e.g., the Eucharist, ministry, etc.) has been reached as a result of ecumenical debates, despite the fact that the participants still adhere to their original convictions. These are the very convictions which have proved so divisive that they were the cause of the urgent ecumenical debate in the first place!

Lindbeck believes that existing models of religion fail to provide an explanation of ecumenical agreement, and that this failure has the effect of making claims to ecumenical agreement seem implausible. These models of religion Lindbeck defines as the ‘cognitive’ (or ‘propositional’) model and the ‘experiential-expressive’ model. The cognitive model is essentially realist and sees doctrines as

²¹ Ibid., p. 7. In a sense, then, *The Nature of Doctrine* presents a transcendental argument. Hans Frei also notes this, calling *The Nature of Doctrine* “a modest transcendental inquiry.” in his contribution to *Theology and Dialogue*, p. 277.

²² Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 7.

²³ Ibid., p. 15.

purveyors of propositional truth claims about reality, albeit ultimate reality.

Religions on this view are like philosophy or science (as "classically conceived").²⁴

He claims:

This was the approach of traditional orthodoxies (as well as of many heterodoxies), but it also has certain affinities to the outlook on religion adopted by much modern Anglo-American analytic philosophy with its preoccupation with the cognitive or informational meaningfulness of religious utterances.²⁵

The experiential-expressive model, which Lindbeck claims is totally in the ascendancy, follows the road set out by liberal theologians such as Schleiermacher and Tillich. Here the language of religious belief is construed as an expression of pre-linguistic religious experience. Religious language has to function in a symbolic and analogical fashion in order to try and capture this particular type of experience. Doctrines are interpreted as "noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations."²⁶

Lindbeck says that attempts have been made to take the best from the cognitive-propositional and the experiential-expressive models and forge something better - a third way - but that ultimately these attempts have failed (he is thinking specifically of the work of both Lonergan and Rahner). This approach recognises

²⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁵ Ibid. The main thrust of Lindbeck's arguments are against the experiential-expressivist position and so he does not say much about cognitive-propositionalist theologians. The people he mentions briefly are Peter Geach, G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and Malcolm Muggeridge (Ibid., p. 24). He does admit that "Traditionalists of this kind are by no means ignorant of modernity and are often among its most effective critics." (Ibid.)

²⁶ Ibid.

that both 'propositional' and 'experiential' elements exist within religions. Lindbeck says they are not easily combined into one model and these attempts become too complicated to be plausible.²⁷

Lindbeck's own 'third way', the cultural-linguistic model, is not in any way an amalgam of the other two models. He is deliberately proposing something more radical. His model emphasises

... neither the cognitive nor the experiential-expressive aspects of religion; rather emphasis is placed on those respects in which religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life and are thus similar to cultures (insofar as these are understood semiotically as reality and value systems- that is, as idioms for the construction of reality and the living of life). The function of church doctrines that become most prominent in this perspective is their use, not as expressive symbols or as truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.²⁸

Referring to his own experience in ecumenical debate, Lindbeck says that the cultural-linguistic model is the most plausible of the various options in that the cognitive and experiential-expressive approaches completely fail to account for the fact of ecumenical agreement. For Lindbeck the goal of ecumenical activity is *reconciliation* (not necessarily agreement) between parties which allows them to remain faithful to their own beliefs and their own practices and doctrines. Lindbeck believes that his 'cultural-linguistic' model allows for "reconciliation without capitulation", but that this is entirely impossible for the other two

²⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 17f.

models.²⁹ He claims that under the cognitivist view, if doctrines conflict with each other one must be rejected. That is, logically only one account may be true or describe reality correctly. On the other hand, the experiential-expressive view, he says, allows for *different* meanings for the *same* doctrines. It also allows for change in doctrinal *form* without change of content (meaning). So the actual doctrines are not important for either agreement or disagreement under this view, since what is important is the underlying religious *experience*.

By contrast, the cultural-linguistic approach construes church doctrines as *rules* and Lindbeck claims that this “regulative approach” has no difficulty in explaining the fact of agreement without capitulation.³⁰ This is because rules have an invariant meaning despite differing circumstances, staying the same “under changing conditions of compatibility and conflict.”³¹ Conflict between doctrines or rules can be resolved in different ways. For example, conflict between certain rules (Lindbeck’s nontheological examples are ‘Drive on the Left’ versus ‘Drive on the Right’) is resolved by saying where and when they apply. Disagreement can also be resolved on occasion by allowing one rule to have priority over another. Providing a religious example, Lindbeck says that different doctrines of transubstantiation have historically been in conflict with each other. But these conflicts have occurred in particular historical circumstances and the conflict is removed when these historical and cultural domains are carefully specified. They

²⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

³¹ Ibid.

are in conflict, that is, only in some particular (historical) context. This is a good example of postliberal theology's sociological or anthropological approach.

However, Lindbeck's examples here are not quite convincing. Contingent rules such as 'Drive on the Left' do not seem to have straightforward religious equivalents. A doctrine specifying, for example, that the Sabbath is to be observed on a Saturday as opposed to a Sunday might be seen to be equivalent. But it would not necessarily be seen as such by the religious adherent. 'Drive on the Left' may seem a trivial injunction - just as long as we all do the same it does not matter whether 'left' or 'right' is specified. Interpretations of Sabbath-keeping may not seem as trivial to certain religious adherents. There is also a question raised here about *levels* of rules. Legislation within a country which decides on one option rather than another for the direction of traffic, is an instance of a more general principle which says traffic should only go in one direction. Obviously for the religious example, there could be seen to be a more general rule about Sabbath keeping. Which then should be considered '*the* doctrine', the specific or the more general rule? Which forms the grammar of the language?

The second example about context leads to the question (and does not answer it) of just *how much* context would be necessary to remove conflict. Here, Lindbeck talks about "certain historical contexts" which may cause problems. He says that, despite this, doctrines in conflict may be "harmonized by appropriate

specifications of their respective domains, uses, and priorities.”³² But it will surely not always be a simple matter to specify what these are.

Another objection to Lindbeck’s view of doctrine could be the idea that doctrines *say* something and do not just provide a rule. They surely have a propositional content. He acknowledges this and agrees that “It seems odd to suggest that the Nicaenum in its role as a communal doctrine does not make first-order truth claims, and yet this is what I shall contend.”³³ Lindbeck says that doctrines, construed as rules, do involve propositions, but that doctrines are not first-order propositions themselves. He claims they are second-order discourse about first-order practice. He says,

... rule theory ... does not locate the abiding and doctrinally significant aspect of religion in propositionally formulated truths, much less in inner experiences, but in the story it tells and in the grammar that informs the way the story is told and used.³⁴

Lindbeck also admits that the construal of doctrines as rules is not exactly a novel idea. Many theologians throughout the ages, he claims, have seen “that at least part of the task of doctrines is to recommend and exclude certain ranges of ... propositional utterances or symbolizing activities.”³⁵ Lindbeck says that what is new and distinctive about his cultural-linguistic approach is that this becomes the

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 19.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

only purpose of doctrines “as church teachings”.³⁶ Doctrines - like the grammar of a language - provide a framework for what can and cannot be said.³⁷

Lindbeck says that the construal of doctrines as rules or as a grammar “is not to suggest that other functions of doctrinal formulations are unimportant”.³⁸ He goes on to say that,

The chanting of the Nicene Creed, as Tolstoy observed with some puzzlement among Russian peasants, can be an immensely powerful symbolization of the totality of the faith even for those who do not understand its discursive propositional or regulative meanings. There are other Christians, however, for whom the expressively symbolic or liturgical role of the Nicaenum is minimal and for whom it is nevertheless of the utmost doctrinal importance. Old-style Calvinists, for example, did not sing it in their eucharistic celebrations, but it was for them a crucial means for differentiating themselves from Unitarians.³⁹

Within the comparison between religions and languages in his cultural-linguistic model, Lindbeck is able to distinguish between grammar and vocabulary. Items of vocabulary, he says, are made up of “symbols, concepts, rites, injunctions, and stories”.⁴⁰ The vocabulary can be variable, but a lexical core does exist, “found for the most part in the canonical scriptures.”⁴¹ However, he says, “it is not the

³⁶ Ibid. Church teachings are obviously the most important function for Lindbeck since it is the church which provides the ‘culture’ or community that forms religious thought.

³⁷ Doctrines are not, of course, the sole provider of the religious categorical framework. Biblical narratives also form part of the framework, and I will look at the use Lindbeck makes of narrative in the next section.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 80f.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 81.

lexicon but rather the grammar of the religion which church doctrines chiefly reflect.”⁴² He continues,

Some doctrines, such as those delimiting the canon and specifying the relation of Scripture and tradition, help determine the vocabulary; while others (or sometimes the same ones) instantiate syntactical rules that guide the use of this material in constructing the world, community, and self, and still others provide semantic reference.⁴³

By ‘semantic reference’ Lindbeck means, for example, the doctrine which says that Jesus is the Messiah works as a semantic rule for the reference of “Messiah” (or equivalent titles).

Lindbeck also says that doctrines are *paradigms*, that they show the application of the rules. That is, they illustrate proper usage.⁴⁴ Doctrinal faithfulness does not mean simple repetition, then, as rules are used as a guide for subsequent or novel instances.

It is clear that the cultural-linguistic model rests on the comparison between religions and languages or cultures. In his definition of the model, Lindbeck says, “religions are seen as comprehensive interpretative schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualised, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world.”⁴⁵ Lindbeck, as we have seen, believes that there

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

is a scholarly acceptance of this sort of definition in many disciplines (e.g., history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology) but that theology and theological ideas are lagging behind.⁴⁶ The reason for this is mainly the hegemony of the experiential-expressive model of theology, which undermines a cultural-linguistic approach. We have already looked at some of the reasons in the previous section. Lindbeck himself believes the gap occurs because “experiential-expressivism fits the religious needs of modernity.”⁴⁷ For example, the idea that religious experience is private means that the social origins of belief are ignored. Lindbeck says,

The mere idea that becoming religious might on occasion be rather like achieving competence in the totally nonoptional grammatical patterns and lexical resources of a foreign tongue seems alienating and oppressive, an infringement of freedom and choice, a denial of creativity and repugnant to all the most cherished views of modernity.⁴⁸

Lindbeck believes a religion must be seen as a framework which “shapes the entirety of life and thought.”⁴⁹ He claims this is like the Kantian *a priori* only it refers to skills which are acquired (and might have been otherwise). A religion is not primarily a collection of beliefs, although it may include these, or some sort of symbolic scheme for basic religious experience. On the contrary, Lindbeck says,

... it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. Like a culture or language it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 33.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

So, Lindbeck is clear that religion as a cultural-linguistic system is the *precondition* of all these other attributes which, for other theologians, constitute a religion. However it would be simplistic, he goes on, simply to say that religions *cause* experiences “for the causality is reciprocal.”⁵¹ But it is not an equal partnership - he wants to claim that the external influence is the greater.⁵² Therefore, according to Lindbeck, “the linguistic-cultural [sic] model is part of an outlook that stresses the degree to which human experience is shaped, molded, and in a sense constituted by cultural and linguistic forms.”⁵³ There are, however, nuances in this relationship. Lindbeck says that although experience is shaped by language, language itself is shaped by our practice. He says that “all symbolic systems have their origin in interpersonal relations and social interactions.”⁵⁴

In his assessment of *The Nature of Doctrine*, Gordon Michalson comments that a lot hangs on this primacy of the outer compared to the inner.⁵⁵ He believes that this ordering also derives from a theological project on the part of Lindbeck. Michalson feels that Lindbeck’s real reason for promoting the cultural-linguistic model has less to do with ecumenical issues than he claims. Michalson thinks there is a (not very) hidden theological agenda on Lindbeck’s part. He says of *The*

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., p. 33f.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

⁵⁵ Gordon Michalson, ‘A Response to Lindbeck’, *Modern Theology* Vol. 4, No. 2, January 1988, pp. 107-120.

Nature of Doctrine, that the “postliberal position on the intelligibility of the Christian faith ... controls the total action of the book.”⁵⁶

However, Lindbeck himself is very open about his theological agenda. In the Foreword to *The Nature of Doctrine*, he clearly admits that “the motivations for this book are ultimately more substantively theological than theoretical.”⁵⁷ It is also more than fair to note Lindbeck’s immense personal and professional commitment to ecumenical debate over very many years which should not be undervalued or discounted. For Lindbeck the issues of ecumenism and theology are strongly connected. He says,

As one who is deeply concerned about Christian unity, I would like to believe ... that my work is of service to the church and to the glory of God. In brief, although the argument of the book is designed to be doctrinally and religiously neutral, it is prompted by convictions about the kind of theological thinking that is most likely to be religiously helpful to Christians and perhaps others in the present situation.⁵⁸

D. Z. Phillips, however, has also criticised Lindbeck over this distinction between the inner (experience) and the outer (language/world), which he construes as the distinction between experience and practice. Phillips takes the Wittgensteinian line that says the question of primacy, asking ‘which came first?’, is simply not a very useful question to ask! He says it is a ‘chicken or the egg’ question which gets us nowhere. Phillips goes on to say “Instead, what is needed is to emphasise, from

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 112.

⁵⁷ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 10.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

the outset, the *character* of religious practices".⁵⁹ He thinks, for example, that *worship* is much more central to Christian doctrine than Lindbeck allows. He says that,

Doctrines are seen as laying down the grammatical parameters of the faith: they are concerned with what should and should not be said about God. But such considerations are important only in so far as they are related to the realities of the spiritual life.⁶⁰

Furthermore, Phillips is dubious about the value of trying to apply philosophical techniques for the benefit of theology. He believes that,

As far as the philosopher is concerned, his work is over when he notes [the] situation, ragged as it is, with as much clarity as he can achieve. An ecumenically minded theologian, on the other hand, is working within the situation, hoping to change it in certain respects. The difficulty in locating the audience to which Lindbeck belongs is due to the fact that while, on the one hand, he is undoubtedly an ecumenical minded theologian, he seems to think the theological enterprise is furthered by philosophical means.⁶¹

Phillips also thinks Lindbeck is confused about the notion of grammar. Firstly, he says that he does not understand Lindbeck's claim that seeing doctrines as forming a grammar necessarily allows for ecumenical 'reconciliation without capitulation'. He points out that there will surely be cases of *grammatical* as well as *doctrinal* disagreement, and to resolve the conflict, one position may well have to be

⁵⁹ D. Z. Phillips, 'Lindbeck's Audience', *Modern Theology* Vol. 4, No. 2, January 1988, p. 143. [Italics added].

⁶⁰ D. Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism*, London, 1988, p. 211.

⁶¹ D. Z. Phillips, 'Lindbeck's Audience', p. 149.

dropped.⁶² Phillips says this grammatical resolution is a different sort of capitulation, but it is still capitulation. He says it “would now take the form of the admission that one had not been speaking properly about God.”⁶³

Secondly, Phillips thinks Lindbeck is confused when he says that grammar is imperfect because it will have exceptions.⁶⁴ Phillips correctly points out that, construed as grammar, a doctrinal statement in fact “cannot have exceptions, since it is in terms of the grammar that we determine what is to count as the rule and what is to count as an exception to it.”⁶⁵ This confusion shows that Lindbeck is not consistent in the use of his own analogy between religions and languages, doctrines and grammar.

Lindbeck wants to promote his theological agenda, to encourage ‘postliberal’ theology, because he thinks there is currently a congenial climate for such an approach, and, as we have seen, this is a climate fostered by other academic disciplines, including philosophy. Unfortunately, Lindbeck says, this congeniality only seems to exist in the wider academy, in these other disciplines. He is looking for a new Reformation in theology because the climate seems right, but he does

⁶² Ibid., p. 146. Phillips does not give an overt example of a case of grammatical *difference* here, but he does say that an example of a grammatical rule is ‘God is ____’ (where the blank represents some attribute). This gives us a rule for the use of ‘God’.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.149. (The reference in *TND* is p. 81.)

⁶⁵ Ibid.

not see one coming.⁶⁶ He compares late twentieth century and Reformation changes in thought and sees similarities. These include a move away from metaphysics and logic towards texts and rhetoric; and a move from large systems to particularities. But he is disappointed over how little has been achieved in theology and in the church. Lindbeck certainly *hopes* that postliberal theologians will increase in number, a hope he voices at the very end of *The Nature of Doctrine*. However, he despairs of the postliberal enterprise taking hold in the wider community.

Lindbeck thinks that part of the difficulty is a straightforward decline in the use of Christian language. He asks who the competent speakers are (I think he is more asking where they might be found). Christians are simply not fluent enough in their own language. He says that "Christians through most of Christian history have spoken their own official tongue very poorly."⁶⁷ He goes on to say that it "has not become a native tongue."⁶⁸ Lindbeck believes the situation is actually even worse because "Among Christians ... there are many groups who seem to speak mutually unintelligible dialects."⁶⁹ He thinks this problem of linguistic competence must be urgently addressed. Good teaching and constant practice constitute the answer. Christians must be *trained* to speak properly, through *catechesis*. This will teach the faith and build up the community of believers.

⁶⁶ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 25. See also Lindbeck, 'Barth and Textuality', *Theology Today* Vol. XLIII, No. 3, October 1986, p. 366.

⁶⁷ Lindbeck, *TND*, p.100.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 99.

Lindbeck says that "Instead of redescribing the faith in new concepts, [catechesis] seeks to teach the language and practices of the religion to potential adherents."⁷⁰ Again this is an implicit criticism of liberal theology. He says that, in contrast to what he refers to as "modern translation" procedures, catechesis "has been the primary way of transmitting the faith and winning converts for most religions down through the centuries."⁷¹

This theme of diminishing Christian linguistic abilities is repeated in other places by Lindbeck. For example, in an article, 'Barth and Textuality', he complains about what he calls "Biblical illiteracy" in both church and society.⁷² This loss of language, he says, has also engendered a loss of imagination and a denuding of the religious categories which shape our religious experience. That is, if Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model is correct, then it is the grammar of the learned religious language which then forms religious experience. He thinks what should happen is that the *Biblical* categories, the grammar and vocabulary provided by the story, should become *our* categories. By this he means they work in a Kantian manner, forming the basic categories of thought which causes us to experience, and name that experience, in ways formed by the nature of those categories. Again, when this has not happened, Lindbeck thinks liberal theology is to blame. He says, "the liberal tendency to redescribe religions in extrascriptural frameworks has once

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 132.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Lindbeck, 'Barth and Textuality', p. 370.

again become dominant.”⁷³ He further says that religions “have become foreign texts that are much easier to translate into currently popular categories than to read in terms of their intrinsic sense.”⁷⁴

A final point which should be made here about Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic model is the lack of distinction in all that he says between a ‘foreign’ and ‘native’ language. Although he has a lot to say about language learning, Lindbeck never distinguishes between learning to speak a native language and learning to speak a foreign tongue. As we have seen, he thinks Christians should learn to speak the language of their faith so that it may *become native*. However, would not the concept of *fluency* have been sufficient for his purposes? I think he confuses the issue because he sees both learning our native language and learning a foreign language as skills which we acquire. However, they are different skills. This distinction may be important to take on board because the difference between the two is one concerning *choice*. We learn a foreign language because (for whatever reason) we choose to do so. We have no such option as an infant but to acquire our native tongue. This issue of why we may learn the Christian language is thus side-stepped by Lindbeck. But it is a reasonable question to ask, given an analogy with a *foreign* language. Presumably Lindbeck’s vision (for very worthy reasons) is of an enlarged Christian community such that we are born into this particular culture and its language. However, again, even this picture may not be as

⁷³ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 124.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

homogenous as Lindbeck's easy use of 'Christian language' suggests. Here, issues of broader cultural influences have to be clearly addressed (does a Korean Christian speak the *same* language as a Scottish Christian?).

4.4 Narrative, Intratextuality and Truth

What work does the notion of narrative or story do for Lindbeck? His main considerations of narrative come in the final chapter of *The Nature of Doctrine* where he expands the cultural-linguistic approach to religion and sketches out what a postliberal *theology* would look like. He says this final chapter is an "addendum to the main argument" but also says that it is a very necessary addendum. He explains, "if the theory of religion we have been exploring is useful only for understanding church doctrine and not also in other theological areas, it will ultimately prove unacceptable even to specialists in doctrine."⁷⁵

Following his Yale colleague Hans Frei, Lindbeck sees narrative as a key element in the development of belief.⁷⁶ And again we see that it is the outer (narrative)

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

⁷⁶ There is also an important theological agenda here for both Frei and Lindbeck. Lindbeck says "For many of Hans Frei's readers, his greatest contribution has been to make possible the restoration of the christologically centered sense of scripture to its traditional primacy." Lindbeck, 'The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation' in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, (ed.) Garrett Green, Philadelphia, 1987, p. 161.

which influences the inner (experience). For Lindbeck, narrative works as a framework, organising and informing experience. Scripture naturally provides the main narrative for the development of the Christian faith. Lindbeck claims that “A Scriptural world is ... able to absorb the universe. It supplies the interpretative framework within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality.”⁷⁷ A ‘narrative theology’ also helps us move away from liberalism. This is because “It does not suggest, as is often said in our day, that believers find their stories in the Bible, but rather that they make the story of the Bible their story.”⁷⁸

But, how exactly does the Scriptural world ‘absorb the universe’? Lindbeck says that the world of the Bible - its sagas and stories; images and symbols; syntax and grammar - is “interiorized”.⁷⁹ This is a learning process, a combination of both good teaching and of practice in the use of scriptural language. We have seen this emphasis on practice already. However, Christians must keep their language in good working order, Lindbeck says, not just for their own sake, but for the sake of everyone else. This, therefore, must become part of the churches’ mission. This is because Lindbeck is convinced that the Biblical narrative has had an immense, but usually unnoticed, wider cultural influence, and he has written about this elsewhere. He points out that even the Enlightenment writers, and including those hostile to Christianity, use a language saturated with Scriptural terms (he

⁷⁷ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 117.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35. This process is referred to in ‘The Church’s Mission to a Postmodern Culture’ in *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World* (ed.) Burnham, New York 1989, p. 47.

cites Huxley, Nietzsche and Marx).⁸⁰ So the Christian texts have had an influence even when not believed. Lindbeck says that once the narratives “penetrate deeply into the psyche, especially the collective psyche, they ... come to supply the conceptual and imaginative vocabularies, as well as the grammar and syntax, with which we construe and construct reality.”⁸¹ However, as we have seen, Lindbeck thinks that Biblical literacy is fading and so, as well as having a detrimental effect on theology and church life, *public* discourse is also impoverished as a result.⁸²

So what would a theology based on these considerations look like? Lindbeck says that traditionally the three key issues in theology are those of *faithfulness* (Dogmatics), *applicability* (Practical Theology) and *intelligibility* (Apologetics).⁸³ Unsurprisingly these tend, in practice, to be interconnected. Lindbeck looks at each of these in turn and says what a postliberal conception of them would be.

Firstly, he says that Dogmatics (an explication of faithfulness) should be pursued in an “intratextual” manner.⁸⁴ This is in contrast to experiential-expressivist and propositionalist theologies which use an “extratextual” method. They locate religious meaning

... outside the text or semiotic system either in the objective realities to which it refers or in the experiences it symbolizes, whereas for cultural-linguists the meaning is

⁸⁰ Lindbeck, ‘The Church’s Mission’, p. 38.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 39ff.

⁸² Ibid., p. 47.

⁸³ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 112.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 114.

immanent. Meaning is constituted by the use of a specific language rather than being distinguishable from it.⁸⁵

So we look at how, for example, the word 'God' is used within a religion and this is what shapes our experience of God. 'Intratextualism' may remind us strongly of Hilary Putnam's 'internalism'. Putnam, we will remember, says in *Reason Truth and History* that our concepts are shaped "by the vocabulary we use to report and describe them" - they exist within a linguistic framework.⁸⁶ The connections between Putnam and Lindbeck are explored further in Chapter Six.

Lindbeck maintains that there is a broad domain for intratextuality. He says it may be apparent in many ways in all instances of rule-governed activity in human life. He says: "Hammers and saws, ordinals and numerals, winks and signs of the cross, words and sentences are made comprehensible by indicating how they fit into systems of communication or purposeful action, not by reference to outside factors."⁸⁷

He goes on to claim that context, therefore, becomes extremely important. He says of his 'winks and signs of the cross' example that these are

... quite distinct from nonmeaningful but physically identical eye twitches and hand motions, and their reality as meaningful signs is wholly constituted in any individual occurrence by their intratextuality, by their place, so to speak, in a story.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Putnam, *RTH*, p. 54.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 114.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

In the case of the description and outworking of religions, Lindbeck says, this is quite literally intratextual.⁸⁹ That is, he points out that almost every major faith has a collection of canonical texts and these, he claims, are essential not just for the survival of the religion in question, but for the very possibility of theology as well. Crucially, they provide believers with the grammar and vocabulary of faith and with the raw material for theological reflection about the faith. This includes any tests of faithfulness.

Lindbeck goes on to describe the method of interpretation that allows us to discover the 'immanent meaning' of a given text. The canonical texts should be read as we read (or used to read) literary 'classics'. Classic texts, he says, "evoke their own domains of meaning."⁹⁰ They do this by describing the story of the people in the books. They thereby create their own *worlds*, and they are, therefore, to be understood in their own terms, and not by reference to any extratextual information.⁹¹ Extraneous references that explain or inform recede in importance. So, to use Lindbeck's example, we need no references to Freud's psychoanalytical theories in order to follow fully and understand Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.⁹²

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 116.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 117.

⁹² Ibid., p. 116.

Literary considerations and concepts, such as *genre*, become very important. For example, although the Bible often looks like history, historical truth or falsity is not the issue. Literary considerations are more important for discovering meaning than historical-criticism. Lindbeck maintains that “As parables such as that of the prodigal son remind us, the reordering of God’s character is not in every instance logically dependent on the facticity of the story.”⁹³ We have to read the Scripture intelligently, always asking ourselves ‘what kind of text is this?’ Lindbeck goes on to consider the question whether the Bible can be considered as a whole, and can therefore be seen as falling under a particular literary *genre* as a whole. What holds such a disparate collection of writings together? He says there is in fact an overarching story “that has the specific literary features of realistic narrative as exemplified in diverse ways, for example, by certain kinds of parables, novels, and historical accounts.”⁹⁴ So, basically, the Bible is the story of God, His biography. This allows us to identify who God is; it makes His character real to us.

John Milbank says that “George Lindbeck and Hans Frei have been quite right to call us back to narrative as being that alone which can ‘identify’ God for us.”⁹⁵ But he goes on to criticise Lindbeck for overlooking narrative’s ‘structural complexity’. For a start, Milbank thinks it is not as easy as Lindbeck supposes to abstract a set of rules of interpretation. For example, what force does the narrative have and does it represent the character or nature of God to different degrees?

⁹³ Ibid., p. 122.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 120.

⁹⁵ Milbank, p. 385.

Milbank also notes how important performance becomes for Lindbeck. However, correct performance is “defined in advance by the exemplary narratives of Jesus.”⁹⁶ He goes on to say

These stories are not situated within the world: instead, for the Christian, the world is situated within these stories. They define for us what reality is, and they function as a ‘metanarrative’ ... in the sense of a story privileged by faith, and seen as the key to the interpretation of regulation of all other stories. However, Lindbeck’s ignoring of the structural complexity of narrative means that his account of metanarrative realism becomes dangerously ahistorical.⁹⁷

Christian narrative is, Milbank says, “artificially insulated” and furthermore becomes a new sort of *foundation*. As a result Milbank thinks Lindbeck fails to provide a truly ‘postmodern’ theology.

David Bryant also says that Lindbeck, and postliberal theologians in general, are inconsistent about historicism.⁹⁸ He says that there are two ideas which are at odds with each other: (1) that there are no transcendental or overarching foundations; and, (2) there is an underlying structure which somehow roots Christian identity. Bryant says that “The rejection of transcendental approaches forces them to locate this structure within history, but the desire to identify it as an unchanging structure leads them to deny that this structure is affected by history.”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 385

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 385f.

⁹⁸ Bryant, p. 31.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

Lindbeck's account of narrative is also open to criticism because of his predilection for referring to narrative in the singular. William Placher makes this point, simply saying, "A theology that appeals so confidently to the biblical narrative (in the singular) has some explaining to do."¹⁰⁰ That is, just as there are different Christian voices, and so Lindbeck has a problem talking about Christian language in the singular, surely the Bible contains more than a single 'narrative'. We have seen Lindbeck try to cope with this problem by saying that *taken as a whole* the Bible is the narrative of God (God's story). But it is clear from the history of Christianity that it is far from self-evident what this story is. There has been, of course, a long history of differing interpretations even about the character and nature of God despite this being exactly what narrative is meant to identify for us. It seems to me that the whole cultural-linguistic project shares this difficulty. If a particular language or story (in the singular) is privileged in the way Lindbeck wants to, then it falls prey to Wittgenstein's 'private language argument'.¹⁰¹ Wittgenstein's argument is essentially a critique of Cartesianism and empiricism, as he undermines the idea of incorrigible private experiences, named by language, known only to the person having the experiences. What Wittgenstein shows is that 'knowledge' is not an appropriate concept here. The same criticisms can be

¹⁰⁰ Placher, 'Postliberal Theology', p. 122.

¹⁰¹ See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 243 - 315.

applied to Lindbeck, as in his case it is the *community* that has a private language for its experiences, that only it can name and know.¹⁰²

Richard John Neuhaus, in his response to *The Nature of Doctrine*, points out that some *extratextual* issues must be of importance too. He asks “Why should one bother to be ‘steeped’ in the texts?”¹⁰³ Lindbeck can provide no *reason* to decide to live in a Scripture-absorbed world. The only ‘reason’ that would seem to fit into Lindbeck’s scheme is simply the fact of faith (acquired somehow). But faith is no *reason*. These issues will be further considered in the next chapter.

However, intratextuality is something that needs to be *practised* - the theory is useless if it is not implemented. This moves Lindbeck on to his consideration of the second of the key areas in theology, Practical Theology (applicability). Here Lindbeck emphasises once again the importance of communities. These must be practising the faith well, concentrating on “their own intratextual outlooks and forms of life.”¹⁰⁴ He says,

The general point is that, provided a religion stresses service rather than domination, it is likely to contribute more to the future of humanity if it preserves its own distinctiveness and integrity than if it yields to the homogenizing tendencies associated with liberal experiential-expressivism.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² This criticism of Lindbeck is, of course, criticism on his own terms. It is not clear whether one can really treat a community or religion as a whole in the way Lindbeck does.

¹⁰³ Richard John Neuhaus, ‘Is there Theological Life after Liberalism? The Lindbeck Proposal’, in *dialog* Vol. 24, No. 1, Winter 1985, p. 70.

¹⁰⁴ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 128.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Furthermore, there will be a benefit both to the particular community and to society as a whole if the community remains true to itself. But Lindbeck is honest enough to point out that the 'evidence' can be read in different ways to suit one's particular theological outlook.¹⁰⁶

It is in his consideration of Apologetics, the area of theology concerned with the intelligibility of the faith, that Lindbeck has to deal with the potential problems of relativism and fideism. These issues are of course central to the interests of this thesis, and I will deal with them in more detail in Chapter Five where I consider the influence of Wittgenstein (in particular, his concept of 'language-games') on Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model for theology.

Part of the difficulty here, though, is with the notion of truth. As we have seen, a sort of *narrative* truth - truth in a context or story - has emerged out of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory. This can obviously lead to accusations of relativism. That is, we have 'true in *L*', where *L* is a language or interpretative scheme, rather than just 'true'. Earlier in *The Nature of Doctrine*, Lindbeck considers the question of truth when looking at how it may be possible to compare religions. It must be part of the ecumenical debate to be able to talk about how different religions may be true (and to what degree) over a particular doctrine. He contrasts the different

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

models of religion he has defined and sees how they are able to deal with such comparison and with the notion of truth.

For *propositionalists*, truth is a matter of correspondence. A statement is true if it stands in a particular relation with some state of affairs. On the other hand, for *expressivists*, truth is “a function of symbolic efficacy.”¹⁰⁷ Religions are judged by how well they articulate religious feeling and experience. In contrast to both these views, for a *cultural-linguistic* approach,

... religions are thought of primarily as different idioms for construing reality, expressing experience, and ordering life. Attention, when considering the question of truth, focuses on categories (or “grammar”, or “rules of the game”) in terms of which truth claims are made and expressive symbolisms employed.¹⁰⁸

So how true religions are comes down to a matter of assessing their ‘categorical adequacy’. Lindbeck goes on to say that “categorical adequacy ... makes meaningful statements possible.”¹⁰⁹ He says that, for example, in mathematics, it is pointless to say that one object is larger than another if one lacks the concept - the *category* - of size. Meaningfulness does not guarantee truth, it just makes truth or falsity possible. Lindbeck goes on to say that the differences between religions could on some occasions be similar to different descriptions of reality, between what he calls ‘mathematical’ and ‘nonmathematical’ accounts of reality.¹¹⁰ By this

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 47f.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 48.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

he means the 'mathematical' account is quantitative (factual, perhaps) and the 'nonmathematical' is qualitative (subjective). Therefore, he concludes, such descriptions may be incommensurable. For example:

... the means for referring in any direct way to the Buddhist Nirvana are lacking in Western religions and the cultures influenced by them and it is, therefore, at least initially puzzling how one can say anything either true or false about Nirvana, or even meaningfully deny it, within these latter contexts.¹¹¹

He goes on to say then,

... the cultural-linguistic approach is open to the possibility that different religions and/or philosophies may have incommensurable notions of truth, of experience, and of categorical adequacy, and therefore also of what it would mean for something to be the most important (i.e. "God"). Unlike other perspectives, this approach proposes no common framework such as that supplied by the propositionalist's concept of truth or the expressivist's concept of experience within which to compare religions.¹¹²

Again, these views of Lindbeck's obviously raise the possibility of fideism and relativism, to be considered in detail in the next chapter. It is enough to note here that they emerge as a result of what the cultural-linguistic model leads Lindbeck to say about truth.

There is a sense, though, which Lindbeck wants to retain of truth as correspondence, the notion of truth prevalent in the cognitive-propositional

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 49.

model. He says a religion (as a cultural-linguistic system) may (or may not) correspond to "What a theist calls God's being and will."¹¹³ He goes on

As actually lived, a religion may be pictured as a single gigantic proposition. It is a true proposition to the extent that its objectivities are interiorized and exercised by groups and individuals in such a way as to conform them in some measure in the various dimensions of their existence to the ultimate reality and goodness that lies at the heart of things. It is a false proposition to the extent that this does not happen.¹¹⁴

This seems extremely confused. For a start, it is not clear how these equivalencies could be perceived. Lindbeck is saying that a religion is considered true (or 'truthful', I suppose) if it corresponds to 'God's being and will'. But what is this? Talking later about 'the ultimate reality and goodness that lies at the heart of things' does not make anything clearer. It is also very strange to consider a religion to be one large proposition. This is a problem throughout for Lindbeck: he often speaks as if a religion was an undifferentiated whole, easily perceived and spoken of. The reality of religions would seem, in our actual experience, to be more complex and amorphous. For example, religion is surely tied up with *practices*.

This sort of statement ('a religion may be pictured as a single gigantic proposition') is also open to a Rorty-style critique, which is also adopted by Lindbeck. That is, how is it possible to stand 'outside' as it were to see religion in this way? Lindbeck

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 51.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

is attempting a God's Eye View. Lindbeck says the things he says here because of what he sees as the performative aspect of religious belief. Hence, he says truth is to do with how people orientate themselves. Right performance is important for him.

Lindbeck actually says categorical truth is not enough on its own. A place for some minimal propositional truth should be found.¹¹⁵ This is, after all, the sense of 'true' that most Christians give to many of their statements. Lindbeck rightly thinks it is important to reflect this accurately, to "do justice" to what a religious person thinks they are saying.¹¹⁶ For example, he says Christians "generally act as if an affirmation such as "Jesus is Lord" is more than a categorical truth".¹¹⁷ Lindbeck thinks that the cognitive-propositional theory of religion has this in its favour over an experiential-expressivist one where truth is explained in terms of symbol. He then says it is very important that a cultural-linguistic theory should be able to maintain this sort of propositional truth.¹¹⁸

To explain this minimal propositional truth, Lindbeck distinguishes between 'intrasystematic' and 'ontological' truth. The first is truth as coherence; the second truth as correspondence which he says "according to epistemological realists, is attributable to first-order propositions."¹¹⁹ He says that "Utterances are

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 63.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 64.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

intrasystematically true when they cohere with the total relevant context.”¹²⁰

Under a cultural-linguistic view, context includes other utterances and also the whole ‘form of life’. Christian statements (e.g. ‘Christ is Lord’), then, are true if they fit into a pattern of believing, behaving and thinking. More mysteriously, he says, “They are false when their use in any given instance is inconsistent with what the pattern as a whole affirms of God’s being and will.”¹²¹ So, he goes on, the cry “Jesus is Lord” is *false* if uttered by a Crusader using it to justify the killing of the infidel. This is because “when thus employed, it contradicts the Christian understanding of Lordship as embodying, for example, suffering servanthood.”¹²² So there is a performative aspect to religious utterance.

Lindbeck thinks that the notion of coherence makes sense in other non-religious contexts too, but the example he gives referring to Euclidean geometry is poor. He says,

... a demonstration ... which implies that parallel lines eventually meet must be false for formally the same reasons that the crusader’s cry must be false: the statements in both cases are intrasystematically inconsistent. The difference is that in the Christian case the system is constituted, not in purely intellectual terms by axioms, definitions, and corollaries, but by a set of stories used in specifiable ways to interpret and live in the world.¹²³

However, a ‘demonstration’ in geometry which says ‘parallel lines meet’ is very different from the utterance ‘Jesus is Lord’. In fact, there cannot be a

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

demonstration of parallel lines meeting in Euclidean geometry anyway because ‘parallel lines never meet’ is, in fact, an *axiom* of the system. Lindbeck would have fared better if he had taken as an example something non-axiomatic (e.g., from within arithmetic, ‘ $2 + 2 = 5$ ’). That notwithstanding, even if Lindbeck had a better example, it is wrong to think that stories can form a *system* clearly specifiable in the ways Lindbeck needs.

For Lindbeck, intrasystematic truth is a necessary condition for ontological truth but not a sufficient one. For example, Lindbeck says ‘Denmark is the land where Hamlet lived’ is intrasystematically true within the context of the play, but this has no bearing on its ontological truth, that is, if the sentence were taken to be making a historical claim. Ontological truth can also depend on context or performance - correct use and “subject dispositions” are important. He says “this performatory conformity of the self to God can be pictured in epistemologically realist fashion as involving a correlation of the mind to divine reality.”¹²⁴ So, there is no need for cultural-linguistic accounts of religion to exclude a “modest cognitivism or propositionalism.”¹²⁵

Lindbeck goes on to ask “What, however, is the function of truth claims about God if their cognitive [i.e. propositional] content is as minimal as has just been suggested?”¹²⁶ Again we see the performative aspect becomes very significant.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 66.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 67.

That is, despite “informational vacuity”,¹²⁷ it authorises certain ways of behaving informed, for example, by stories of the goodness of God. The importance of performance, and therefore of context for performance, leads Lindbeck to say that “there is a sense in which those unskilled in the language of faith not only fail to affirm but also cannot deny that “Jesus is Lord”.”¹²⁸ He goes on:

One must be, so to speak, inside the relevant context, and in the case of a religion, this means that one must have some skill in *how* to use its language and practice its way of life before the propositional meaning of its affirmations becomes determinate enough to be rejected.¹²⁹

However, D. Z. Phillips does not think Lindbeck is taking the right approach. He says,

... Lindbeck had coined the term ‘intrasytematic truth’ only because, impressed by the way in which we talk of truths where physical objects are concerned, he had jettisoned talk of ‘ontological truth’ where religion is concerned. Instead of doing so, he should have explored the grammar of ‘the independently real’ in a religious context.¹³⁰

Phillips thinks Lindbeck is right to emphasise the fact that religious experience depends on the prior existence of language and ways of behaving that we would already call ‘religious’.¹³¹ However, he thinks that Lindbeck needs to consider much more closely how concepts like ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ actually function within religious forms of life. This issue of truth within a postliberal theology will be further considered in the following chapter.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 68.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Phillips, ‘Lindbeck’s Audience’, p. 141

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 142f.

CHAPTER FIVE:

LINDBECK, LANGUAGE AND REALISM

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will consider the key problems facing Lindbeck's postliberal theology which are of particular interest to this thesis. These are whether Lindbeck can avoid relativism and the dangers inherent in adopting any sort of incommensurability. By his commitment to particularism, does Lindbeck consign theology to a ghetto? How can criticism be possible in a postliberal world?

The concepts of 'language-game' and 'forms of life' which Lindbeck has picked up from his reading of Wittgenstein will be explored in particular. Lindbeck is of course attracted to the idea of a language-game since a distinct, internally coherent linguistic scheme is the basic idea behind his description of religions as cultural-linguistic systems. I think, however, that it is this idea which encourages Lindbeck to consider that religions may be in some way incommensurable (religious cultures as self-defined entities). However, as we saw through Hilary Putnam's discussion of Wittgenstein in Chapter Three, this is a distortion of the original Wittgensteinian concept of a language-game.

Issues of incommensurability also provide a contemporary slant to the theological notion of 'fideism'.¹ This concept is that since religious truth cannot be proved by means of reason, then *faith* is foundational to religious truth.²

Since an influential article in the late 1960's by Kai Nielson³, there also has been a species of fideism called 'Wittgensteinian' fideism. This position states explicitly that a religion constitutes its own 'language-game' and so is in no need of external criteria or justification. Indeed, for the Wittgensteinian fideist, such criteria or justification would not just be inappropriate, none would be possible. Religious discourse simply is not the sort of thing that needs explanation.

Lindbeck's commitment to defining religions as cultural-linguistic entities leaves him open to the same criticisms as the so-called Wittgensteinian fideists. To what degree *are* religions autonomous, distinctive and internally coherent? The rejection of an expressivist-experiential approach in theology disallows a common basis (a common language) to be able to discuss differences. These are, of course, issues Lindbeck addresses in *The Nature of Doctrine* and we will look at his defence, but he does seem, at first glance, to be sliding towards an unwanted relativism.

¹ Fideism is of course usually used as a pejorative term, especially as employed by 'natural' theologians (for example, those from the Thomist tradition). Hence it is not advantageous for a particular theology to be considered fideistic, as its place in the academy could be challenged. That is, if the academy is based on principles of open inquiry and criticism, then fideism undermines this basis.

² This idea that religion is somehow out of the scope of rational inquiry or justification is actually Kantian in origin, but Kant kept room for the transcendental.

³ Kai Nielsen, 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', *Philosophy* Vol. 42, No. 161, July 1967, pp. 237-254.

The suspicion is that postliberalism either cannot or will not avoid incommensurability, and hence is fideistic.

In this chapter I will consider the work of two theologians who have tried to extend Lindbeck's work, Bruce Marshall and William Placher. Marshall invests a lot of time in the analysis of what 'truth' might become in postliberal theology. But he has his own radical theological agenda; he wants to get on with the business of *doing theology*. He makes no apologies for having a particular starting point, and a set of assumptions accompanying that starting point. In Marshall's case, the starting point is Christian faith. On the other hand, Placher tries to present a more moderate view and is, as a result, more readable although not necessarily, in the end, more plausible.⁴

A major alternative theology is considered briefly in this chapter's fourth section, to query some of Lindbeck's criticisms of what he has (unsympathetically) described as the experiential-expressivist approach to theology. For many years the liberal Catholic theologian David Tracy has been carefully defining a 'revisionist' theology, an experiential-expressivist theology that tries to accept pluralism, particularism and the critique of the enlightenment. I will explore Tracy's contention that Lindbeck's picture of experiential-expressivism fails to capture the true complexity of such a theology.

⁴ It is ironic that, despite one of his books being titled *Unapologetic Theology*, what Placher actually presents is an apologetic for postliberalism.

The final section in this chapter will return us explicitly to the issues of realism and relativism and critically considers the implications of a postliberal theology. Lindbeck does want to retain some sort of realism in order to be true to what religious participants actually say and do. Can a theologian like Lindbeck afford to fly so close to the winds of relativism?

5.2 Wittgenstein, language-games and incommensurability

Wittgenstein is mentioned by name in less than a dozen places in *The Nature of Doctrine* and his texts are not considered in detail by Lindbeck. The Wittgensteinian terms 'language-game' and 'forms of life' are not listed in the index to Lindbeck's book. Despite this, his appropriation of what he understands as Wittgensteinian linguistic philosophy is utterly key to Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic project.⁵ It is his use of these Wittgensteinian concepts that allows the project to get going at all: they allow him his comparison between languages and religions. So, while Lindbeck may not be too clear about the *details*, he is clear about his *debt* to Wittgenstein. He says of the cultural-linguistic model that while

⁵ Lindbeck says that he has been inspired by the influence Wittgenstein's work has had on other theologians. (*TND*, p.24) In a footnote he says he is particularly indebted for his understanding of Wittgenstein to his Yale colleague, Paul Holmer.

on the cultural side it is rooted in the sociology of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, “its roots go back ... on the linguistic side to Wittgenstein”.⁶

As we saw in the previous chapter, it is these twin influences - both philosophical and social-scientific - that help define postliberal theology. Lindbeck thinks they allow religions to be described ‘objectively’ as an anthropologist might describe them. For Lindbeck, the Christian religion must be distinctive, and an anthropological approach allows this distinctiveness to be underlined. In addition, the emphasis on linguistic skills (which are learnt and then maintained by good and frequent use) allows the hegemony of liberal theology to be challenged. According to Lindbeck, as we considered earlier, it is the *outer* (cultural-linguistic framework) which largely shapes the *inner* (specific beliefs). Religious behaviour is not the outcome of some private religious experience; the behaviour comes rather from an already existing linguistic or cultural framework.⁷

Narrative operating within a community also plays a huge part in forming the linguistic resources for the adherent, according to Lindbeck. He says that “The proclamation of the gospel, as a Christian would put it, may be first of all the telling of the story, but this gains power and meaning insofar as it is embodied in

⁶ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 20. Lindbeck also refers to the influence of Wittgenstein on his work in ‘Confession and Community: An Israel-like View of the Church’ in *The Christian Century*, Vol. 107, No. 16, May 9th 1990, p. 493. This is a fascinating and extremely autobiographical article.

⁷ D. Z Phillips points out that this makes our practices seem mysterious (*Faith After Foundationalism*, p. 219).

the total gestalt of community life and action.”⁸ How the story becomes “embodied” perhaps remains ambiguous though. Does the story tell one how to live, or is the story somehow *validated* by the life experiences one has? Obviously, Lindbeck holds that it is the story that does the defining, which shapes our experiences. Even though the relationship may be nuanced, this is the primary relationship.

It is obvious from *The Nature of Doctrine* that Lindbeck is influenced by the way Wittgenstein apparently says that linguistic meaning comes from practice, from within that which Lindbeck has above called “the total gestalt of community life and action.” Earlier Lindbeck claims that,

... just as a language (or “language game” to use Wittgenstein’s phrase) is correlated with a form of life, and just as a culture has both cognitive and behavioural dimensions, so it is also in the case of religious tradition. Its doctrines, cosmic stories or myths, and ethical directives are integrally related to the rituals it practices, the sentiments or experiences it evokes, the actions it recommends, and the institutional forms it develops.⁹

Lindbeck uses this new perspective on religion (that its language has a shaping and not just naming function) as a way to criticise experiential-expressivism. This approach allows him to focus on particular practices. Cultures must be true to themselves and not be watered-down by believing they can be re-described in terms of some universal properties. We have seen that Postliberal theology is very

⁸ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33. (This is the only explicit reference to ‘language-game’ in *TND*.)

critical of the concept of religion based on a universal experience which is essentially private to the individual person. Lindbeck maintains that religions

... need not be described as anything universal arising from within the depths of individuals and diversely and inadequately objectified in particular faiths; it can at least as plausibly be construed as a class name for a variegated set of cultural linguistic systems that, at least in some cases, differentially shape and produce our most profound sentiments, attitudes, and awarenesses.¹⁰

A similar point is made succinctly by Patrick Sherry in his book *Religion, Truth and Language-Games*, where he applies Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument to this issue. He says,

... Wittgenstein's thought here disposes of the view that religious terms merely denote private experiences, and so helps us to discern false accounts of 'inwardness' in religion. Religious language is formulated against the background of the practices and beliefs of a religious community.¹¹

This view of language and of the religious life has obviously been liberating for some theologians. Clearly an approach to religious language which appropriates Wittgenstein's insights about the public nature of language is extremely useful, especially as part of a critique of liberal theology, a theology which uses language to 'point' to inner experiences. Lindbeck claims that

... even those experiential-expressivists - such as Lonergan (or Karl Rahner and David Tracy) - who acknowledge that experience cannot be expressed except in public and intersubjective forms, do seem to maintain a kind of privacy in the origins of experience and language that, if Wittgenstein is right, is more than doubtful.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 40.

¹¹ Patrick Sherry, *Religion, Truth and Language-Games*, London and Basingstoke, 1977, p. 8.

¹² Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 38.

However, it should be realised that Wittgenstein is *not* saying that we cannot refer to our own experience. It is just that this should not be the paradigm for linguistic usage. Wittgenstein's own purpose (or one of them) was to undermine the then prevailing idea that the *referring* function of language was its primary function. Clearly sometimes language does refer. Wittgenstein simply wants us to keep our philosophical wits about us and be able to discern how language is being used in particular contexts.

A major problem with Lindbeck's account is that it is not clear that we can or should speak of 'religion' as a whole, as a complete, distinct language-game. As we saw in Chapter Three, where Putnam discusses Wittgenstein's analysis of religious belief and language, there are many problems in the wholesale appropriation of the idea of a 'language-game' construed on the scale of 'a religion'. Wittgenstein's examples, as we saw, are small-scale. This point has been drawn out by numerous commentators. For example, Sherry says "even a single religion is a family of many language-games."¹³ Nicholas Lash follows Fergus Kerr in saying that religion is not a form of life and religious discourse is not a language-game.¹⁴

¹³ Sherry, p. 34.

¹⁴ Nicholas Lash, 'How Large is a "Language-Game"?', *Theology*, Vol. LXXXVII, No. 715, January 1984, pp. 19-28.

Again, it is Lindbeck's (theological) commitment to particularism and the intelligibility of the faith which leads him to the implication that religions are made up out of large, internally consistent, distinctive linguistic systems.

It could be fair, however, to say that Lindbeck's idea of religion as a cultural-linguistic entity, as a language-game, is a legitimate *extension* of Wittgenstein's micro-level concept. However, I think Lindbeck subsequently gets into difficulty because of his assertion that religions can be (in some important ways) incommensurable. He says,

... the cultural-linguistic approach is open to the possibility that different religions and/or philosophies may have incommensurable notions of truth, of experience, and of categorical adequacy, and therefore also of what it would mean for something to be most important (i.e., "God"). Unlike other perspectives, this approach proposes no common framework such as that supplied by the propositionalist concept of truth or the expressivist's concept of experience within which to compare religions.¹⁵

Truth, then, becomes a central issue, but one that raises some distinct problems for Lindbeck. If specific religious beliefs make claims about reality and the nature of things (and often they seem to make extremely radical, *universal*, claims), these must surely be *true* and not just true for some local language. As we saw in the final section of the previous chapter, Lindbeck does not satisfactorily resolve this issue. The next section of this chapter will look at the work Bruce Marshall has done concerning the problem of truth within a postliberal theology.

¹⁵ Lindbeck, *TND*, p.49

With his analogy between languages and religions and his desire to avoid the universal, Lindbeck has often been criticised for privileging Christian discourse and faith.¹⁶ It is from within the Christian world-view (given through the life and practices of the community and through Scriptural norms) that we interpret all other worlds. But he could claim that ethnocentrism is unavoidable, so why not embrace it?

It is considerations like these that have led to many of the misgivings about theologies such as postliberalism. D. Z. Phillips, himself accused of similar things, says that,

... the misgivings involve the suspicion that religious beliefs are being placed outside the reach of any possible criticism, and that the appeal to the internality of religious criteria of meaningfulness can act as a quasi-justification for what would otherwise be recognised as nonsense. ...There is little doubt that talk about religious beliefs as distinctive language-games has occasioned these misgivings.¹⁷

Phillips believes that these misgivings are often justified. He says that they “point to a strain in the analogy between religious beliefs and [language] games.”¹⁸ Religion, he says, is not an activity cut off from the rest of our life and experience. He says that “Religion must take the world seriously.”¹⁹ My point is that, even if

¹⁶ Lindbeck is of course being consistent with his methodological framework. It would be impossible for a cultural-linguistic system not to privilege something. Lindbeck’s criticism of experiential expressivism is that it privileges a modern (philosophical) perspective. But it’s not clear how criticism or choice between perspectives is possible. Lindbeck surely thinks experiential-expressivism is *wrong*.

¹⁷ D. Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, London and Basingstoke 1993, p. 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

it is a legitimate move for Lindbeck to extend Wittgenstein's notion of language-games, he gets into trouble when he says they may be incommensurable.

What Lindbeck is trying to do is construct a *nonfoundational* theology. Again, he wishes to provide an alternative to liberal theologies which are founded on experience. He is also being consistent in following his chosen philosophical influences, where foundational theories are out of favour. 'Foundationalism' is a concept which can be defined variously, but broadly in epistemology it is the view that knowledge must rest on a foundation made up of indubitable beliefs. These sort of beliefs are usually based on sense-experience. (What this basic sort of experience might be has been open to debate. Famously, Descartes could only come up with one indubitable belief: *cogito ergo sum!*)

Foundationalism in this philosophical sense is largely seen as a failed project. It is over the consequences of this failure that Hilary Putnam takes issue with Richard Rorty. Rorty is a revisionist, says Putnam; he thinks we have to revise how (or if) we talk of 'rationality', 'fact' and 'objectivity'. But Putnam says we must hang on to (and learn from) our ordinary ways of speaking. He says that he does not think that "our reaction to the failure of a philosophical project ... should be to abandon ways of talking and thinking which have practical and spiritual weight."²⁰ So the failure of foundationalism does not mean we *have* to embrace any sort of

²⁰ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 20.

relativism. We do not have to doubt our use of reason. As we have seen, this is a typical antiseptical line taken by Putnam - he thinks (following the great pragmatist thinkers) that doubt requires justification as much as belief.²¹

Putnam also does not think we get trapped in our own world-views as a result of the failure of foundationalism. However, this is just the criticism to which Lindbeck remains open. We have already seen that Putnam rejects the particular interpretation of Wittgenstein's 'language-games' (propagated by Norman Malcolm). Putnam says that there are surely objective (in the ordinary uncomplicated use of 'objective') facts which allow us to decide between world-views.²² There are better or worse performances within a language-game; there are better or worse language-games. Interestingly, while Putnam says that Rorty gets Wittgenstein wrong (because he follows Malcolm), Rorty does capture an important fact. That is, Wittgenstein inherits Kant's pluralism. No one language-game has exclusive rights to 'true' or 'good'.²³

A recent critic of Lindbeck is Francis Watson, who censures him for the implications of nonrealism in *The Nature of Doctrine*.²⁴ Watson believes that Lindbeck's problems run essentially from his desire to construct his views entirely from within Christian language:

²¹ Putnam, *Pr.*, p. 19.

²² Ibid. p. 35.

²³ Ibid. p. 38.

²⁴ Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World*, Edinburgh, 1994.

Preference is given to that which is small-scale, local and sharply defined, and no room is permitted for the possibility that, when due allowance has been made for the claims of particularity, the Christian narrative might still be *about* something of rather more than local significance. Narrative, on this view, cannot be *about* something any more than language can: like language, its role is to give us the *means* to talk about things.²⁵

The flaw in this, according to Watson, is that the story itself directs us outwards.

Conversely another 'realist' criticism is that it is also the case that the world *intrudes* on us and we are constrained by its structure. Donald MacKinnon has pointed out that this may even often have tragic consequences.²⁶ His example is that of Oedipus in Sophocles' play. MacKinnon points out that Oedipus' search for the truth "issued in a knowledge that he could not bear".²⁷ Thus the reality of outside facts can prove devastating and, ironically, this is a realism Lindbeck cannot escape through his talk of narrative.

A further difficulty is that there is narrative diversity *within* the Christian scriptures. Theologians like Lindbeck may end up considering a 'canon within a canon'. This latter criticism is made by David Tracy. He points out that the idea of a perceived unity in scripture comes under severe pressure. For example, even if a unity is seen as the "confession of the self-manifestation of God" in the person of Christ, the interpreter is left facing "the wide diversity of ... expressions for this

²⁵ Watson, p. 135.

²⁶ Donald MacKinnon, *Explorations in Theology* 5, London, 1979.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 163.

single event.”²⁸ Tradition and present experience must also be brought in (since scripture is “the church’s book”).²⁹ Present-day churches have different emphases, hence there is a privileging of different parts of the canon.

Of course Lindbeck, with his ecumenical concerns, is well aware of the fact of religious and scriptural diversity. His view would be that each particular canon-based sect must retain its own self-identity, to speak its own language well. The problem for Lindbeck arises because he continues to speak of ‘Christian narrative’ in the singular.³⁰

Lindbeck is aware of the many difficulties he faces. In the context of his consideration of the intelligibility of religion, he identifies the two main problems.

He says,

First, intratextuality seems wholly relativistic: it turns religions, so one can argue, into self enclosed and incommensurable intellectual ghettos. Associated with this, in the second place, is the fideistic dilemma: it appears that choice between religions is purely arbitrary, a matter of blind faith.³¹

However, he thinks skill and performance provide answers to these problems.

Religion will not end up in a ghetto because theologians will speak their language

²⁸ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, New York, 1991, p.250.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ In addition, Lindbeck is still left with the problem we saw in the previous chapter. He uses the terms ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ as if they are distinctive, well-defined wholes. They are in fact much more amorphous and difficult to define.

³¹ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 128.

better. They will also be better respected through the current vogue for intratextual conversation. However, at times Lindbeck's strategy seems simply to be to acquire competence (although it remains unclear *why* we should acquire this competence) in the religious discourse, and to keep on saying the same things, only louder.

5.3 Beyond Lindbeck: Bruce Marshall and William Placher

At this stage it is useful to look at the influence of Lindbeck's theology and to see how his postliberal programme has been extended.³²

Since the publication of *The Nature of Doctrine* and the response it has provoked, Bruce Marshall has consistently proved one of Lindbeck's strongest supporters. This is not in so much material he has written in support of Lindbeck, but the fact that he has *carried on* Lindbeck's postliberal theology in a very robust manner. The other theologian this chapter considers, William Placher, is less obviously radical and much more concerned to provide almost an apologetic for postliberalism. They provide a useful contrast of styles and approach, and between

³² Part of the reason is the size of Lindbeck's own output - *The Nature of Doctrine* remains the manifesto for postliberalism that Lindbeck has never significantly enlarged upon.

them allow us to see how the strategy of *The Nature of Doctrine* may be used and whether postliberalism can be made a more viable theological option.

Marshall continues Lindbeck's twin commitments to particularism and to taking part in dialogue (in Marshall's case, specifically Jewish-Christian dialogue).³³ Both Marshall and Lindbeck think that the best way to be able to take part in a conversation is to be true to yourself and to your own defining beliefs. Self-identity and the intelligibility of the faith are of paramount importance. Thus for Marshall, as for Lindbeck, meaning is closely linked to communities and their network of beliefs and practices. In addition (again following Lindbeck) Marshall claims that normative patterns of belief are paradigmatically encoded in Scripture.³⁴

However, despite the importance of the formation of a community's self-identity, description is still possible from the 'outside'. Marshall says,

Interpretation [of Christian belief and practice] actually succeeds when it gives an account of a Christian worldview and ethos such that adherents of the religion who are equipped to understand the interpretation can recognise it as a description of their own belief and practice.³⁵

So the practised insider and the skilled outsider may come up with descriptions which are not much different. (Again, this is essentially an argument from

³³ See, for example, Bruce Marshall, 'Truth Claims and the Possibility of Jewish-Christian Dialogue', *Modern Theology* Vol. 8, No. 3, July 1992, pp. 221-240.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 222-3.

anthropology.) However, Marshall is still committed to a radical ethnocentrism. He goes on to claim that “the Christian community and its members naturally and reasonably treat its own most central beliefs as the primary, although not exclusive, test of truth - not only of its own discourse, but of any discourse it may encounter.”³⁶

Two problems remain for Marshall. Firstly, given this kind of interpretative priority, it is hard to see that descriptions from the inside could closely resemble those from the outside, or, even if they did, how we could tell. Secondly, it does not address the problem we saw previously concerning the interpretation of *universal* claims made by a particular discourse.

Marshall spends a lot of time considering the issue of truth. (As we saw in the previous chapter, Lindbeck’s own account of the nature of postliberal truth was unconvincing.) This is due to his commitment to self-description and interpretation. It is also because he accepts what he picks up from contemporary philosophy as the probable demise of realism, and with it a particular way of construing truth (as correspondence). He says that “It may be that theology can and should get along without realism and the realist notion of correspondence.

³⁶ Ibid.

But it seems unlikely that theology can do without the notion of truth.”³⁷ So the question Marshall wants to answer is, how can we talk about truth in theology?³⁸

Returning briefly to Marshall’s view of realism above, we have already seen in this thesis that at the very least it could be said that the jury is still out on the question of realism. There are philosophers of stature, such as Putnam, who have far from given up on it. However, Marshall decides to follow the antirealist strand in modern philosophy. He does actually mention Putnam, who he takes to be espousing some sort of antirealism, and also refers to Michael Dummett and Donald Davidson. (In fact, as we shall see, Marshall is much influenced by the philosophy of Davidson.)

Marshall provides a clear and informed discussion of the theories of truth some theologians and philosophers have held. He rattles through Aquinas (as a realist account), Barth (truth is some sort of correspondence with the word of God), Putnam and Dummett (truth is non-epistemic) and finally Donald Davidson and his appropriation of Tarski truth semantics.³⁹

Davidson is immediately commended by Marshall for saying that correspondence is not philosophically interesting. That is, in the end, correspondence does not

³⁷ Bruce D. Marshall, “We Shall Bear the Image of the Man of Heaven”: Theology and the Concept of Truth’, *Modern Theology* Vol. 11, No. 1, January 1995, p. 93.

³⁸ See, for example, Marshall’s book, *Trinity and Truth*, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

³⁹ Marshall, “We Shall Bear”, pp. 95-104.

account for the truth of sentences. This is because any true statement is logically equivalent to any other. So any true statement can be substituted for any other within a logical expression, without affecting the truth of that whole expression. It is Tarski's 'T-sentences' which capture truth (for what it is worth). That is sentences of the form "'X" is true iff X'. For example, "'Snow is white" is true iff snow is white'. Marshall also picks up from Davidson the idea that truth is connected with *belief* as well as with meaning. He says Davidson's insight is that "everybody has to have mostly the same set of mostly true beliefs."⁴⁰ Apart from the premature proclamation of the death of realism as a philosophical option, all this seems to be fine.

Suddenly, however, Marshall moves up a theological gear. He tests the Tarski-Davidson definition of truth against the Christian claim that 'Jesus is the truth'. He does this because he thinks we are constrained to define things from within our particular discourse. He is quite clear about this approach and has set it out at the start of his article. He says: "I will not ... consider whether various Christian beliefs are true, but rather ask what notion of truth would be adequate to these beliefs. That is: what must truth be, if Jesus Christ is the truth?"⁴¹

To a philosopher this seems a bizarre move. Why does someone like Marshall who shows so much philosophical understanding (after all Tarskian semantics are

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 104.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 94.

not at all simple), want to take this abrupt turn? He is of course being consistent with his postliberal principles. These say that one *has* to speak from within one's own discourse since we have no other place from which to speak. So our values and interests are bound to have a defining role. Marshall says,

... a Christian theological account of truth, like a theological account of anything else, will have to discipline and change any notion of truth achieved in abstraction from distinctively Christian beliefs, from those convictions in light of which theology aims to interpret and assess the rest of what we think we know.⁴²

This is an extremely strong assertion and it is not clear to me why Marshall spends so long assessing (for example) Davidson on truth, when at the end of the day he says that this position (like any other position) has to be 'disciplined' by Christian theology. So, he says, the real insight about truth is that truth is a *person* (Jesus Christ). Here is the stark contrast between philosophy and theology. Theology in this guise is not at all concerned to show how it may be rational, justified or whatever. There seem to be no concessions to even a minimal 'natural' theology.

Taking all this into consideration, it could be easy to criticise postliberalism of sectarianism and imperialism. However, it is important to note that the idea that the Christian community gets to define its own terms, and to interpret alien terms by these terms, does not necessarily single out *Christianity* for any special criticism. This is the sort of ethnocentrism we saw Richard Rorty espouse earlier

⁴² Ibid., p. 105.

in this thesis - Rorty says he speaks as a pragmatist and political liberal. The claim is that we can do nothing else but interpret the world from the starting point we have, with the values we have inherited and accepted.⁴³ Rorty's position is of course criticised by Putnam who says it is very easy for the radical ethnocentric position to slide into relativism and scepticism. This is despite the fact that Putnam himself emphasises the non-neutrality of our descriptions; they are not context-free. But he is clear about the necessity of maintaining realism. We have our descriptions and we have the world. Putnam's claim is that these are interconnected to such a degree that we can never hope to disentangle them.

There is also too much weight put on the notion of *interpretation* in Marshall's theology. Wittgenstein suggests that our interaction with the world, our encounter with others, are based on a huge reserve of shared actions and reactions. As we found in Putnam, this suggests that people like Rorty, and now Lindbeck and Marshall, draw too sharp a line between 'us' (and our interpretations) and 'the world'.

A main point against Lindbeck and Marshall is also that their internal beliefs are not contingent. They could not have been otherwise. This leaves them vulnerable to criticism by way of a falsification principle. Ernest Gellner specifies the particular difficulties here in his *Legitimation of Belief*:

⁴³ Rorty would of course have no truck with theology of any sort, 'postliberal' or otherwise and neither would Davidson.

What really makes ... falsifiability so powerful is this: if you insist that a believer specifies the conditions in which his faith would cease to be true, you implicitly force him to conceive of a world in which his faith is *sub judice*, at the mercy of some fact or other. But this is precisely what faiths ... systematically avoid and evade. They *fill out* the world of their adherents, the world which they in a way create, and they interpret the processes of cognition in such a way that all verdicts must in the end, be returned in their favour.⁴⁴

Marshall does defend himself and postliberal theology against accusations of this type of fideism. He explores Lindbeck's metaphor of "absorbing the world":

To speak of the biblical text "absorbing the world" can be taken as suggesting an account of both the interpretation and assessment of truth claims encountered by the Christian community which are initially external or alien to its belief and practice.⁴⁵

Marshall again employs Donald Davidson's philosophy, in this case his 'principle of charity'. This says that to maximise understanding, we must take as many alien sentences as possible to be true. Marshall says that this sort of principle of charity about the truth of statements "is operative in the theological project of absorbing the world into the scriptural text."⁴⁶ However, there is a different slant which Marshall gives to the principle (an apparent limit to Christian charity). New and unfamiliar sentences must be understood in a way which "(a) constitutes the best available interpretation of those sentences and (b) allows them to be true."⁴⁷ The

⁴⁴ Ernest Gellner, *Legitimation of Belief*, Cambridge, 1974, p. 176.

⁴⁵ Marshall 'Absorbing the World: Christianity and the Universe of Truths' in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, (ed.) Bruce D. Marshall, Notre Dame, 1990, p. 74.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 75.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

slant is that this “true” means true by the interpreting community’s lights, “whether they cohere with a wide network of Christian belief and practice.”⁴⁸

The justification for the web of beliefs in question, Marshall says (following Lindbeck), is the ‘assimilative power’ of those beliefs. He admits that such power can only be judged over a long period of time, and that the results will inevitably be ambiguous, but he says it is the best test available and that it allows postliberalism to avoid fideism. The assessment of the success or failure of that assimilative power is public; it can be assessed both from the inside and from the outside. He says the “crucial requirement is ... that one be acquainted with both the religion and the discourse it encounters in adequate detail.”⁴⁹

Glossing over what “adequate detail” might be, Marshall himself points out a possible problem: if the assessment of the success or failure depends on the beliefs of the community and its practices of justification, then it cannot be used to *choose* between views. However, he says that even if the notion of ‘assimilative power’ is limited it is still a good test, because it is still able to be judged to a degree by those outside the community. Marshall admits that there is still a “whiff of fideism”, that his project could still be accused of isolationism, imperialism and relativism.⁵⁰ He tries to defend himself on all these charges.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 79.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

As far as isolationism goes, he says that the point of Lindbeck's metaphor is that the world is seen through the (Christian) text. This is an open-ended engagement which is by its nature both necessary and incomplete. My criticism would be though, that it may be open and incomplete, but it is not *risky*. Marshall does not risk the truth of his background web of beliefs in this engagement.

The second criticism, of imperialism, essentially says that the 'other' is never taken seriously enough. In his defence, Marshall says this criticism suggests that there is a neutral criterion of rationality which we can apply in all cases. He says it is not possible (or rational) for us to be so open that we, in fact, doubt all our own beliefs. (A weaker objection would be that we are prepared to doubt *some* of our beliefs.) He admits, though, that the idea of assimilation seems to disallow even this. However he looks at a historical example to try and help his case. His example is from Aquinas and purports to show that Christians are able to "revise and expand what they take to be the plain sense [of Scripture] in light of whatever well-supported alien claims are pertinent."⁵¹ This upholds the principle of charity, according to Marshall. But the question remains how a postliberal scheme can ever allow us to discern what is 'pertinent' or not. Marshall is finally not convincing where he tries to avoid the relativistic outcome of postliberal ethnocentrism.

⁵¹ Marshall, 'Absorbing the World', p. 96.

William Placher, on the other hand, does try to find a sort of rationale for postliberal theology. His approach to justifying and extending postliberal theology is to place it in the context of a response to the questioning of (or even the end of) modernity and Enlightenment values. He too wants to be able to get on and 'do theology' and thinks that what he describes as the new pluralistic philosophies can help provide a way to do this. Placher, like both Lindbeck and Marshall, is aware of the dangers of fideism and relativism. These are to be avoided, but he says he does not want to end up with liberalism. He does, however, explicitly say that he wants to find a middle way between universalism and relativism.⁵² It is still the case, though, that he intends to retain Christianity's distinctive voice and its place in the general conversation. He says that "Confronted by our culture's standards of what makes sense and what doesn't, postliberal theology invites Christians to say, 'We don't look at things that way', and to nurture communities that offer an alternative vision."⁵³ The contemporary emphasis on pluralism gives Christianity this voice.

How does Christianity actually take its place in the conversation? Surely a real conversation must be open to the possibility of criticism (and self-criticism should also be a possibility). Placher tries to address these issues by discussing the work of the philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer and considering lessons learned from hermeneutics.⁵⁴ Placher concludes that the meaning of the *text* is primary (not any

⁵² Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, p. 12.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

possible meaning of the author) and that since we all bring different assumptions to a text (what Gadamer calls a 'horizon'), meanings will differ from person to person. But there can be, says Placher using Gadamer's famous phrase, a 'fusion of horizons'.⁵⁵ Tradition (the most distinctive of voices) is not necessarily inimical to this process. Placher says that "The goal is pluralism, the most open conversation possible. Repressive tradition can inhibit it - so can the suspicion of tradition."⁵⁶

Placher addresses the problem of Christianity's universal claims. His example is that the message of the Christian gospel is intended to be applicable to everyone. He uses this, however, to justify a belief that everyone should join in conversation with Christians. He says that those "who admit they argue out of a tradition ... can nevertheless believe in the truth of their claims: truth not just for them but for everyone."⁵⁷

So Placher, like Marshall, has to spend much time analysing the nature of truth. He starts by distinguishing between truth and justification.⁵⁸ Truth is universal; justification is context-dependent. Truth is also to do with the perceiving of patterns - which brings in the Christian notions of typology and eschatology. Some people may never see a pattern; but patterns may yet be emerging. It is only looking back at the end of things that we may be able to see the pattern. Not

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 115.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 117.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 123.

surprisingly, Placher says that truth is also intimately connected with narrative.

He admits that the relationship is complex:

... Christians think that what we believe is true - not just one perspective amongst others but the right perspective. But what we believe is all tied up with a series of stories, and the way in which those stories are true is a more complicated question.⁵⁹

The truth in a given narrative may not be a historical truth but a moral or social truth unconnected with the literal truth in the story. Conversely, Placher can think of cases where some historical facts *would* matter and he cites as an example someone who has been inspired by the story of the life of Martin Luther King Jr. His point is that you cannot say “generally and in advance” what sort of claim you will be committing yourself to. “The kinds of claims you make depends on the particular story you use and the way you use it.”⁶⁰ Following the work of Frei on Biblical narrative, Placher says they firstly lay out the shape of their own world and secondly identify the character of God.⁶¹ God is a personality we get to know in the story, and this identification of God is more important than the literal truth of the story in which he is placed.⁶² Placher’s example on this occasion is that of an anecdote about a friend - this can successfully depict and convey the person’s character without the anecdote in question being completely true. We say ‘Yes, that captures just what he is like’. This is something we may say even if the veracity of some part or parts of the story are questionable. Placher goes on to say

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 130.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 131.

⁶² Ibid., p. 132.

“so with the biblical narratives letting these stories convey to us who God is in a way that only a story could does not commit us to the truth of each episode.”⁶³

However, this example does not really convince, as the anecdote allows us to be struck by a *likeness*. In the case of the character of God, we only have the story to tell us what God is like.

Placher goes on to say that the text is normative and it is this which gives us the necessary apparatus in order to form judgements.⁶⁴ God has to be prior. Placher says,

My claim is ... that, to the extent that I take the pattern of these stories to be the pattern for my life and of the world, I am committed to believing that the God they describe is not the projection or useful construct of the people in the story. The logic of the stories is that God's action comes first and generates human responses. *If* I buy into the stories, then I have to buy in to that logic.⁶⁵

Placher seems unabashed by the obvious circularity of his argument, nor does he seem to care that it is essentially an argument from faith, and is fideistic.

Another aspect of a commitment to truth would be how truly open (and open to criticism) the participant in the conversation is. Here Placher again follows Lindbeck. To be really serious about openness, you must be serious about your

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 134.

own position and this takes us back to the view that we must be honest and “admit that we all start somewhere.”⁶⁶

Given his conclusions, Placher asks how theology should proceed. He discusses the nature of genuine pluralistic conversation and the possibilities for ‘revisionist’ and ‘postliberal’ theologies. This brings him into a dialogue with David Tracy whose work we will look at in the next section.

5.4 David Tracy’s ‘Revisionist Theology’

This section provides a brief indication of the importance and relevance of revisionist theology as defined by the Chicago theologian David Tracy. The crucial relevance is, of course, the fact that Lindbeck thinks Tracy’s theology largely typifies what he refers to throughout *The Nature of Doctrine* as ‘experiential-expressive’. I will provide a brief résumé of David Tracy’s theology with specific reference to issues raised in our discussion of postliberal theology. I will then try to assess to what degree Lindbeck’s criticisms of experiential-expressivism are damaging to Tracy’s more sophisticated theological programme. Tracy has himself claimed that his own theology is much more complex and

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 149.

nuanced than Lindbeck's rather simplistic portrayal of experiential-expressivism.⁶⁷

In effect, then, this section will consider, via Tracy, a defence of liberal theology against Lindbeck's postliberal theology.

Tracy is very aware of the problems facing contemporary theology and, like Lindbeck, he wishes to find a way forward. In his monograph, *Dialogue with the Other*, he explicitly considers the nature of inter-religious dialogue. He starts from the initial recognition that "There are good reasons to understand our period and our needs as more post-modern than modern."⁶⁸ By this he means that there have been undeniable pressures on certain aspects of modernity and certain irrefutable, irreversible changes. He says that, in addition to the cultural change which questions the superiority of Western culture, there has also been an ecclesial change, a change in the demography of the church which is now challenging Eurocentrism. Tracy also recognises the intellectual shifts undermining modernity, in particular the modern concept of reason. He says,

Without serious rethinking, the Enlightenment notion of rationality is in grave danger of becoming part of the problem, not the solution. That is even the case for those, like myself, who continue to believe that the very nature of the claims of theology demands public, indeed transcendental or metaphysical explication.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ See in particular, David Tracy, 'Lindbeck's New Program for Theology: A Reflection', *The Thomist* 49 1985, pp. 460-472.

⁶⁸ David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, p. 1.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

So, again like Lindbeck, Tracy is aware of the particular context in which theology today finds itself. His theology describes a very different path from Lindbeck yet through similar terrain.

In *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, Tracy helpfully draws the distinction he sees between his own type of theology and the kind of theology Lindbeck advocates. He says

Theology as a discipline has many peculiarities. For some critics, the theologian seems, at best, a useful generalist who wanders too widely; at worst, a narrow particularist. As a generalist, so the argument runs, the theologian can sometimes provide penetrating analyses of trends, principles, symbolic resources and human needs. Too often, however, the theologian as generalist seems, like [the] Supreme Court, simply to follow the election returns. As a particularist (more accurately as a confessional theologian), the theologian speaks for a particular group, community or tradition whose claims to meaning and truth may seem doubtful to a wider tradition.⁷⁰

What then is 'revisionist' theology? David Tracy first coined the phrase in *Blessed Rage for Order*.⁷¹ It is a species of liberal theology which seeks to be in significant and sympathetic *dialogue* with contemporary culture but is not itself *defined* by that culture. It believes that theology can explain itself, provide reasons for its claims, in terms that are accessible to everyone. Theology is therefore public in nature.

⁷⁰ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, p. 3.

⁷¹ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, New York, 1975.

An implication of this public nature of theology is the increased significance of hermeneutics. That is, theology as *interpretation* of tradition ('tradition' here is used broadly to include texts, experience and practices). This emphasis on interpretation is something which is especially of consequence for contemporary theology seeking its place in a 'postmodern' context. Readings and rethinkings have become very important.⁷² Emerging too, Tracy says, is the importance of acknowledging 'the other'. This is to stress that we are not engaged in a *monologue*, telling a single story about the world, but taking part in a conversation, a dialogue which may express many different points of view. Tracy says,

The deceptively simple hermeneutical model of dialogue is one attempt to be faithful to this shift from modern self to post-modern other ... Dialogue demands the intellectual, moral, and, at the limit, religious ability to struggle to hear another and to respond.⁷³

He goes on to claim that there is "no escape from the insight which modernity most feared: there is no innocent tradition (including modernity), no innocent classic (including the scriptures) and no innocent reading (including this one)."⁷⁴ What we are left with, then, is interpretation and such interpretation is accomplished through a strategy of critique and suspicion. We need this sort of strategy because everything is affected by plurality and ambiguity, says Tracy.⁷⁵

⁷² Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, p. 3. The notion of conversation is very important in Tracy's theology, and through his recent discussion of 'the other' he is exploring some of its complexities. For a criticism of a naive idea of conversation, see D. Z. Phillips, 'Reclaiming the Conversations of Mankind', *Philosophy*, Vol. 69, January 1994, pp. 35-53.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5f.

⁷⁵ Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, p. 79.

The interpretative theological process is also something we do for now in our own cultural context (we can do no other).

The subject matter of interpretation is most obviously often written texts, and key to Tracy's theology is the notion of a 'classic', which is a "truly exemplary" written text.⁷⁶ He explains:

On historical grounds, classics are simply those texts that have helped found or formed a particular culture. On more explicitly hermeneutical grounds, classics are those texts that bear an excess and permanence of meaning, yet always resist definitive interpretation.⁷⁷

Tracy goes on to say that, "though highly particular in origin and expression, classics have the possibility of being universal in their effect."⁷⁸ By "excess" of meaning he means many different interpretations are possible, many different emphases. There is also permanence of meaning because a classic will retain significance through time. To provide an example (not Tracy's), it is likely that we will not respond to or read *Hamlet* in the same way as the Victorians did, but the text remains an important text for us, still with significant meaning for this time.

Of course, George Lindbeck also uses the term 'classic' but, as he himself notes, the usage is different. He says that, unlike Tracy, he is "using 'classic' to refer to

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

texts that are culturally established for whatever reason.”⁷⁹ In contrast, says Lindbeck, since Tracy is working from an experiential-expressivist model, Tracy’s view of classics is that they are “expressions of the human spirit [which] ... disclose a compelling truth about our lives”.⁸⁰ However, Lindbeck himself has a problem: how does his sort of classic becomes so considered? It would seem his answer is that texts become authoritative because we grant them authority. This circularity of thought can only be broken by an appeal to revealed truth.

Having given a brief account of Tracy’s theology, we can ask how well Tracy’s position actually fits Lindbeck’s picture of an experiential-expressivist theologian.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the picture of experiential-expressivism painted by Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine* is that experience provides the primary data for theology and that “Different religions are diverse expressions or objectifications of a common core experience”.⁸¹ The experience also has a normative value. Furthermore, on the experiential-expressivist view, a philosophical approach is needed to be able to study religions. Taking Bernard Lonergan as his example of an experiential-expressivist theologian, Lindbeck says that “Lonergan assumes, as do most experiential-expressivist theologians, that the

⁷⁹ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 136.

⁸⁰ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, New York 1991, p. 108.

⁸¹ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 31.

scholarly study of religious phenomena on the whole supports the crucial affirmation of the basic unity of religious experience.”⁸²

Interestingly, the maintaining of a dichotomy between experience and tradition (culture) is one aspect of a *similarity* between Lindbeck and Tracy, according to an article by Stephen L. Stell. He says of Lindbeck that

Throughout his whole analysis, the imposition of a structural polarity unavoidably obscures the mutually constitutive relationships defining experience and tradition, ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, thereby distorting the reality of each and compromising their creative conjunction.⁸³

For Tracy also, says Stell, although he embraces a plurality of voices including that of the cultural-linguistic theologian, there is, at bottom, an overriding existential emphasis. For example, Tracy talks a lot about ‘solidarity’, ‘emancipation’ and ‘liberation’. Stell points out that words like these “are not abstract terms to describe some greater mystery, as Tracy suggests. They are instead derived from particular events and experiences, and gain their definitions therein.”⁸⁴ It could be asked what exactly Stell means by experience and tradition’s ‘creative conjunction’. He says they interact, and that a hermeneutical structure must be found to facilitate this interaction. However, here it is important to remember what has already been suggested in the previous chapter: that this sort of question concerning which came first is an unrewarding one, a chicken-and-the-egg

⁸² Ibid., p. 32.

⁸³ Stephen L. Stell, ‘Hermeneutics in Theology and the Theology of Hermeneutics: Beyond Lindbeck and Tracy’, *JAR* LVI/4, p. 683.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 685.

question. Stell does eventually support David Tracy's point of view, claiming that experience is capable of being transformative, of breaking boundaries.

However it is, of course, the privileging of experience which leads to postliberal criticism. For example, Hans Frei is sure that David Tracy is vulnerable to such criticism; he calls Tracy's approach "experience-anthropology".⁸⁵ He says that what is internal and external to a religion merge into one in Tracy, and both are justified by a foundational theology (i.e., Frei believes, a theology of experience). Frei believes this strips Christianity of its distinctiveness as Christian meaning is firmly and finally subsumed under the more general "religious meaningfulness."⁸⁶ David Tracy, according to Frei, also excludes the context of church and community which forms Christian discourse.

We shall see Tracy's defence of the criticisms concerning 'experience' below, but it is worth saying that this final point is unfair to Tracy. The church is in fact one of the three 'publics' he identifies for the theologian (the other two being wider society and the academy).⁸⁷ However, it is true to say that since Tracy thinks that as a theologian he can somehow stand outside his own religious context, he is open to postliberal criticisms. Thus he is privileging contemporary (modern) culture. But postliberals may be just as guilty of privileging *church*. This is their prime

⁸⁵ Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, (eds.) Hunsinger and Placher, Yale, 1992, p. 33.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, p. 3.

context. The problem remains concerning how 'church-talk' can take part in a wider discourse.

David Tracy has been somewhat indignant about some of Lindbeck's descriptions of experiential-expressive theologians, both generally and personally. He specifically defends himself on the issue of the liberal commitment to 'private experience'. As we saw, Tracy believes that the theologians Lindbeck calls experiential-expressive (including himself) in fact hold a much more complex and highly nuanced position (Tracy says he would prefer the description 'hermeneutical-political' to 'experiential-expressivist'). He says they are not only aware of the problem of private experience, but have been providing a critique of it themselves. Tracy says that "the '*bête noires*' of Lindbeck's position should hardly feel overwhelmed by his charge of experiential-expressivism when their own work has challenged the 'expressivist' and 'privatist' tendencies of earlier liberal experiential traditions."⁸⁸ An 'appeal to experience', says Tracy, is a much more complicated matter than Lindbeck allows. For example, as we have seen, liberal theologians like himself fully acknowledge the importance of public language. Furthermore, in American theology and philosophy there has for a very long time (starting "from James through Dewey") been a strong critique of the more narrow British empiricist notion of 'experience'.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ David Tracy, 'Lindbeck's New Program for Theology: A Reflection', *The Thomist* 49, 1985, p. 465.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 465.

William Placher, however, criticises Tracy over his use of 'public'.⁹⁰ He asks what exactly it means - does it mean, for example, *universal*? Placher says theology cannot be universal as we speak from within a particular discourse, in this case the discourse of Christian theology. Tracy (as Placher admits) does understand this problem, but wants to avoid falling into any 'ghettoisation' of theology. Placher says that Tracy tries to avoid this difficulty by distinguishing between 'fundamental' and 'systematic' theology. The former is largely philosophical and based on the provision of reasonable argument. Systematic theology is the reinterpretation of tradition. It is here that Tracy's conception of the religious classic is crucial. Systematic theology can only survive intact, according to Placher, if the classic is truly public. But he says that it is not. It privileges a Western public, a Western culture.⁹¹ To some degree (as Lindbeck accuses) Tracy does believe in a "basic unity" to religious experience which is foundational. However he also clearly acknowledges the existence of a genuine plurality and an important particularity.

These twin issues of plurality and particularism are obviously of huge importance for the approach to inter-religious dialogue. In *Dialogue with the Other*, Tracy says that one strategy to see what possible criteria for dialogue are available is to study a philosopher who has tried "honestly" to face the problem. He suggests looking at

⁹⁰ Placher, *Unapologetic Theology* p. 156.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

the philosophy of William James.⁹² James, according to Tracy, thinks that there is a unity within religious diversity. He says,

James' typical intellectual strategy, like that of the best of classical Catholic philosophy and theology, was to honor diversity while seeking analogies amid the diversity itself. Differences need not become dialectical oppositions but can become analogies, that is, similarities-in-difference.⁹³

This is what Tracy has referred to as the 'analogical imagination'.⁹⁴ James identifies this unity in difference by studying extreme cases, the lives of those he refers to as 'mystics' and 'saints'. These are the paradigm cases of what it is like to be religious. Their story is public, open to interpretation, and open to understanding potentially by anyone who reads it. Tracy says,

The logic of James' move from analyzing "personal experience" by interpreting "extreme case" documents remains a plausible strategy for anyone wishing to describe one crucial aspect of religion: namely, the individual's experience of religion insofar as others can understand that experience by interpreting it.⁹⁵

It is a plausible strategy because this is public by definition. However, it is not quite fair to say simply that Tracy is a theologian interested in 'openness' and being 'public', and to label Lindbeck as a narrow particularist. Lindbeck is himself clearly committed to a sort of public theology. He is worried that experiential-expressivism will leave theology in a ghetto and he thinks the cultural-linguistic

⁹² This is startlingly similar to Putnam's approach in *Renewing Philosophy* and, of course, William James is also one of Putnam's philosophical heroes. Tracy does say that this sort of strategy is slightly "groping". (*Dialogue with the Other*, p. 28.)

⁹³ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, p. 30.

⁹⁴ See Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, especially pp. 405-456.

⁹⁵ Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*, p. 34.

model makes theology public because *language* is a public phenomenon. Lindbeck says language is a symbol system rooted in “interpersonal relations and social interactions.”⁹⁶ His rule theory of doctrine focuses attention “on the concrete life and language of the community.”⁹⁷ This is surely some sort of publicness; we can see what people do and the sorts of thing they say.

Lindbeck’s position is, however, still undermined by the problems which were raised in section one of this chapter. Lindbeck’s insistence that cultural-linguistic schemes may be incommensurable implies that the possibilities for understanding may be severely limited. We are not allowed the use of something like Tracy’s ‘analogical imagination’ because of its emphasis on being able to enter into someone else’s *experience*. Lindbeck’s own method of entry to a cultural-linguistic system is through catechesis, but why we would decide to learn the ways of a particular cultural-linguistic social scheme remains mysterious.⁹⁸

For Tracy, discussion and interpretation of reported experience is a practical possibility. Classics are open to anybody, and can be read without special training.⁹⁹ The commitment to openness and dialogue shown by Tracy helps him avoid the twin dangers of fideism and relativism which face Lindbeck’s alternative strategy. Tracy may still be vulnerable to the criticism that, at the end of the day,

⁹⁶ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 38.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁹⁸ Of course, Lindbeck himself is not optimistic about catechesis (*TND*, p.133)

⁹⁹ Tracy, *P&A*, p. 98.

his theology is still foundational (founded on experience). However, he has shown clearly that Lindbeck's picture of the 'experiential-expressive' theologian is something of a straw man, and that postliberal theologians need to work harder to meet the objections raised by the more complex model provided by Tracy.

5.5 Towards a Conclusion: Renewing Theology?

The questions we began this chapter with included whether George Lindbeck is able to avoid such a damaging relativism and sectarianism in his theology. Has he successfully been able to adopt the approaches of social-science and strands in contemporary philosophy to construct a radical new theology? It has been argued that his theological strategy is flawed even though it is an understandable (and in many ways laudable) response to the contemporary intellectual situation.

In this chapter's discussion of the difficulties facing Lindbeck's postliberal programme, two contrasting approaches to theology have been identified. These could broadly be called 'universalist' and 'particularist'. As we saw, problems have emerged for both approaches. Lindbeck's postliberal theology, as set out in *The Nature of Doctrine* (particularism), encounters serious difficulties, for example with the status of truth-claims. The alternative universalist theologies, typified by

David Tracy's revisionist theology above, can rely too heavily on theological legitimisation through experience.

However, this is a broad-brush summary and we have also seen complexities in both positions. William Placher, who spends much time comparing both approaches, says that there is probably a false dichotomy between 'revisionist' and 'postliberal' theologies. For example, Placher says that Tracy does not emphasise the role of experience to the exclusion of other factors in the description of the religious life. Tracy's recent stress on the importance of the Christian classic and its influence within the general conversation shows this.¹⁰⁰ Placher believes that "the most thoughtful writers on both sides are trying to say the right things."¹⁰¹ There have also been suggestions that a liberal theology could *incorporate* a cultural-linguistic approach.¹⁰²

I am sympathetic to Lindbeck in his emphasis on practices, not beliefs. In fact, following Wittgenstein, it is clear that it is our practices which often *show* what we believe. In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein says,

"In my heart I have determined on it." And one is even inclined to point to one's breast as one says it. Psychologically this way of speaking should be taken seriously. Why should it be taken less seriously than the assertion that belief is a state of mind?¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, p. 157f.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. p. 20.

¹⁰² David F. Ford, review of *TND*, p. 279.

¹⁰³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 589.

Later he famously says that "The human body is the best picture of the human soul."¹⁰⁴ It is a fallacy (born of Cartesianism) which says that beliefs are fundamentally private, internal to our experience, locked away inside our heads.¹⁰⁵ Consequently the critique of a theology based on private experience provided by Lindbeck is very valuable. However, as we have seen, a 'liberal' theologian such as Tracy may also hold that practices are an essential part of theological meaning. As has been noted, though, both Tracy and Lindbeck are guilty on occasion of continuing to maintain an unhelpful practice/experience dichotomy and privileging one side of the dichotomy.

It is Lindbeck's identification of religion with a culture or language, and his insistence on a strong particularism, that causes him most problems. Although he has obviously been aware of the dangers, it is not clear that he manages to avoid the 'ghettoisation' of theology. As has been suggested at the beginning of this chapter, this has a clear implication for the future of theology as an academic discipline. However, besides this, his particularism also means that we must answer the key question, 'Does postliberalism lead to relativism?' in the affirmative. This leaves postliberal theology with the same ethical problems we saw Hilary Putnam was so keen to avoid in a philosophical context earlier in this thesis.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 178.

¹⁰⁵ See Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, for an analysis of the pervasive and damaging influence of Cartesian dualism in theology.

What in all of this can be picked out about the issue of realism? There is little which is said directly. Those who are busy being postliberal theologians seem more concerned with presenting a particular *picture* of Christianity in the hope that it may become influential. So we see, for example, William Placher concluding that “we ... need to make vivid the judgement the gospel casts against our culture. Perhaps, in service of such a witness, even a modest dose of sectarianism is not such a terrible thing.”¹⁰⁶ However, this means internal coherence has replaced external relevance, and so realism is no longer a live issue for them.

Of course, Lindbeck has a *narrative* realism and also retains some sort of ontological realism (to remain true to what believers mean by some of their utterances). But this kind of realism clearly involves a privileging of scripture. It is therefore not only foundational, but fideistic. Lindbeck needs to say more about what he means by retaining a modest cognitivism. If he cannot make sense of this, it (1) does not amount to anything and he is providing a nonrealist theology; or (2) does provide a sort of realism, but one which has an underpinning function and is thus simply another form of foundationalism. Furthermore, under such a ‘realism’, talk of God also becomes mysterious. Lindbeck does say, of course, that we are provided with *rules* for discourse about God. However, again, it is a particular sort of discourse, and ultimately it is something one either accepts or

¹⁰⁶ Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, p. 169.

not, and this does not seem good enough for postliberal theology to take part in any kind of conversation.

In the end, though, it is important to recognise that both fideism and rationalism are themselves responses to *scepticism*.¹⁰⁷ Perhaps we can see Lindbeck moving unavoidably towards fideism for this reason. Unfortunately fideism, as we have seen, will itself lead to scepticism and relativism, that is, each faith consigned to its own ghetto, unable to provide a reason for its acceptance rather than any another's.

We saw in earlier chapters that Putnam's 'internal realism' is an attempt to avoid unnecessary sceptical moves in philosophy. Putnam stresses that there are better or worse reasons for holding certain things true about the world. As a result, he is (although aware of the difficulties) clearly resisting the call to 'postmodernity' or 'deconstruction'. Putnam's recent commendation of a certain 'empathetic understanding' tries to cut across assumed barriers of meaning.¹⁰⁸ This sounds very similar to David Tracy's theological approach - the use of an 'analogical imagination', a comparison of experiences. However, Putnam does not ignore the importance of *practices* as well.

¹⁰⁷ This point is made by Terence W. Tilley in 'Incommensurability, Intratextuality, and Fideism' in *Modern Theology* Vol. 5, No. 2, January 1989, pp. 87-111.

¹⁰⁸ Putnam, *Pr.*, p. 50.

The concluding chapter of this thesis will provide a final comparison of Putnam and Lindbeck and consider whether Putnam's strategies in philosophy may be of any help to a theology which attempts to be both distinctively theological and also relevant.

CHAPTER SIX

THEOLOGY WITH A HUMAN FACE

6.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter will complete the last remaining part of the thesis argument with regard to the relation between Lindbeck and Putnam. It will then point a way forward for further research by suggesting what a 'theology with a human face' might look like.

Chapter One of this thesis provided a broad exploration of the theological appropriation of 'postmodern' or 'nonrealist' strands in contemporary philosophy. This was to give a clear context for the arguments which followed. One of the main conclusions of this thesis is that while the concept of 'postmodernism' is an understandable, and on occasion both timely and useful reaction against the excesses of 'modernism', theologians and philosophers alike ought to treat it with the most severe caution. The dangers of relativism and scepticism are simply too great. For example, we have seen that theologians need to avoid an easy assumption of the truth of the concept of incommensurability (a key example in this thesis). We have already considered the reasons which have made this concept

either seem attractive to (or unavoidable for) theologians, but argued that its uncritical acceptance leads to a damaging relativism.

Theologians in particular should not be tempted to appropriate postmodernist theories as a way to allow 'proper' or 'real' theology to be done (as we have seen with postliberal theology). There is a danger of the ghettoisation of the subject if this approach is taken. Theology may already have been marginalised by modernism, but I have argued that appropriating postmodernist ideas in an uncritical manner will lead theology down an even worse *cul-de-sac*. Theologians who are not critical (or self-critical) will ultimately simply argue theology as a subject into the obscure confines of seminary teaching.¹

Part One also considered Hilary Putnam's 'internal realist' alternative to the difficulties both of modernism (in particular the 'metaphysical' realist concept of a God's Eye View) and 'postmodern' or deconstructive responses. Putnam's philosophy argues that a way forward is possible which avoids the pitfalls of relativism and scepticism. Part Two went on to describe George Lindbeck's 'postliberal' theology, as outlined in *The Nature of Doctrine*. The question posed was whether Putnam's middle way in philosophy, his 'internal realism', could be used as a model for postliberalism since Lindbeck also claims to want to walk a

¹ The confidence that some theologians have in postmodernism is further misplaced, because the thinkers they often cite with approval could hardly care less for theology and its influence and future (for example Rorty or Kuhn). They do not think its subject matter worthy of the slightest consideration; as far as these people go, theology is already out of the conversation.

'middle way'. The path which can be followed through Putnam's philosophy realises the need to avoid dogmatism or authoritarianism on the one side and scepticism on the other. Thus we have seen that Putnam believes that we can recognise different contexts and traditions, but the simple fact of pluralism does not lead us to become cultural relativists.² We can say that traditions are important, and recognise that we speak from within a particular context, but the conclusion that can be drawn from Putnam is that, despite this, we can still talk of better and worse traditions, better and worse contexts. The other way lies an 'anything goes' relativism and ethical confusion. The important identification of *criteria* for 'better' and 'worse' will be considered later in this chapter.

This thesis has also highlighted the fact that both Lindbeck and Putnam claim to be influenced by Wittgenstein, an influence charted in previous chapters. However, while it is obvious that Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language is crucial for Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model of religion, it has already been shown that Lindbeck has not always picked up the spirit (or letter) of Wittgenstein's philosophy correctly. In particular, his definition of religions as cultural-linguistic entities, suggests that they are instances of what he understands as Wittgensteinian 'language-games'. Furthermore, it has been argued that Lindbeck's subsequent claim that religions may hold incommensurable views of truth and meaning is not in tune with what Wittgenstein was wishing to say about

² Putnam, *W&L*, p. 193.

our use of language. So, the conclusion we came to in Chapter Five is that Wittgenstein's emphasis on the importance of practices is upheld in postliberalism, but is undermined by the way that these are subsumed under the Biblical narrative.

This thesis has argued that Putnam's most recent philosophy, specifically his (perhaps final) honing of 'internal realism', seems much more Wittgensteinian.³ In point of fact, in Chapter Three we read Putnam's discussion of Wittgenstein on the subject of religious belief as a *corrective* to views widespread in theology and which are also clearly suggested by postliberalism. That is, as we saw, Putnam insists that Wittgenstein is not saying "one of the standard things about religious language", in particular that it forms a self-contained, autonomous language-game, inaccessible to anyone but its adherents.⁴

The focus on Putnam's correction of misreadings of Wittgenstein in this thesis is an important outcome for theology. This is because we have seen these misreadings in the influence of 'deconstructive' philosophies on theology, and also specifically within the analysis of Lindbeck's postliberalism. This thesis has already suggested that some theologians do not seem to have become familiar with

³ I do not want to claim uncritically that the test of whether something is good theology or not is whether it is 'Wittgensteinian' (although I might have some sympathy with that idea). A judgement about the final worth of Wittgenstein's philosophy for theology and for the philosophy of religion would be the work of another thesis. My point is simply that since both Putnam and Lindbeck are overtly influenced by (what they understand as) Wittgenstein's philosophy, it is important to assess that influence. The Bibliography to this thesis contains references to several works in theology and the philosophy of religion which deal with the influence of Wittgenstein.

⁴ Putnam, *RP*, p. 148.

the primary texts. The alternative (and I believe correct) interpretation of Wittgenstein provided by Putnam is a useful pointer towards a 'theology with a human face'. As Fergus Kerr says in *Theology After Wittgenstein*, "Language, the living human being, our life, human nature: Wittgenstein's watchwords in the philosophy of psychology are also contributions of central importance to a theology that starts where we are".⁵

However, this final chapter must first consider the possibility that, despite the shortcomings of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model for theology, Lindbeck could actually himself be considered an 'internal realist' in Putnam's terms. There are many obvious points of contact: Putnam says there are no neutral viewpoints; that there is no need for metaphysical foundations; he says he is a 'conceptual relativist', which is a kind of linguistic relativism. That is, what we say is relative to some particular context or language. Lindbeck would concur on all these points. So, is Lindbeck also a conceptual relativist, using *Christian* concepts to shape his world? Since this thesis has already argued that Putnam's internal realist position avoids relativism, nonrealism and scepticism, this would strengthen Lindbeck's own position considerably. We saw in the previous chapter that Lindbeck is very concerned to avoid charges of relativism despite his continuing emphasis on the importance of the defining values of the particular community. It might also be the case that even if we conclude that Lindbeck is not an 'internal

⁵ Kerr, p. 163.

realist' by the evidence of *The Nature of Doctrine* and his other writings, his position could be bolstered to some degree by taking on board aspects of Putnam's philosophy.

This chapter will also pursue Putnam's notion of 'empathetic understanding' (introduced briefly in Chapter Three). While, for Lindbeck, truth may be incommensurable for individuals living within different cultural-linguistic frameworks (languages, cultures), for Putnam imaginative entrance into another's world is part of what makes us "cultured" people.⁶ As we saw in Chapter Three, Putnam thinks that accepting 'incommensurability' as some stumbling block to understanding is to overemphasise the differences that may exist between languages or cultures (this does not mean that, on many occasions, these differences may be severe). This use of imagination is at odds with how Lindbeck sees communication between schemes (when it is at all possible), or how Lindbeck uses the imagination himself (to absorb the world).⁷

As has been suggested in Chapter Five, in the end this aspect of Putnam's philosophy is more reminiscent of David Tracy's 'analogical imagination'.⁸ This concluding chapter will briefly try to relate the two. Finally, it will therefore be

⁶ Putnam, 'Aloft with Freedom's Banner', p.13. Large portions of this material are also to be found in Chapter Nine of *W&L*.

⁷ Lindbeck's blueprint for good communication rests on each cultural-linguistic scheme speaking its language as well as possible, to make how it sees things entirely clear. However, an *imaginative* move of the sort suggested by the work of both Putnam and Tracy is absent from *TND*.

⁸ For the most striking similarities in tone and content, see Chapter Twelve of Tracy's *On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics, and Church*, New York and London, 1994.

suggested in this thesis, as a topic for further research, that David Tracy is potentially a more fruitful interlocutor than Lindbeck with regard to Putnam and the search for a middle way between dogmatism and scepticism. Tracy can provide a way forward here which does not call for us to retreat into a ghetto, nor to abandon our traditions for some mythical universality, some philosophical or theological Esperanto. Tracy says,

The new ecumenism ... is in search of some third way: you may find yourself and the truth of your tradition's way best by being grounded in self-respect while still exposing yourself fully to other ways, other journeys, other traditions... Anyone who undertakes this journey must try to hold together three virtues ordinarily kept apart: the virtue of self-respect and self-dignity maintained by all those who never leave their tradition; the virtue of radical openness to other and different traditions; the virtue of ethical universality with a sense of justice by all who insist upon the communality of the human.⁹

All these considerations obviously raise questions about universal and particular values; the use of religious language and its relation to practices; and the relation between theology and philosophy. These, of course, bring the thesis full circle back to the themes raised in Chapter One.¹⁰

⁹ Tracy, *On Naming the Present*, p. 138.

¹⁰ One of the contributions of this thesis is that it has sought to embed the discussion of important contemporary issues in philosophy and theology within specific cases. It has not become, for example in its consideration of the Lindbeck/Tracy debate, an abstract treatise about what could be seen as the inevitable conflict between Barthian fideism and Catholic analogy seeking.

6.2 Lindbeck and Internal Realism

This section will consider the possibility that, despite the criticisms levelled against postliberalism, there are enough points of similarity between Lindbeck and Putnam for Lindbeck to be considered, broadly speaking, an 'internal realist'. If this is true, it means that Putnam's position will be able to provide support for Lindbeck in occupying the middle ground, and that our suspicion that Lindbeck's theological project falls into a destructive relativism may be removed.

Internal realism has already been described and discussed in Chapters Two and Three of this thesis. However, to provide a short summary: *negatively*, internal realism provides a critique of and alternative to what Putnam calls metaphysical realism, a position which he claims leads to scepticism. It is also presented as an alternative to nonrealism. *Positively*, Putnam says internal realism is 'conceptual relativity'. By this he means that our concepts are always part of a particular language or other. If we recall his argument recounted in Chapter Three, if we speak the 'language' of Polish logicians we may come to a different conclusion about the number of (logical) objects which exist in some model than would be the case if we spoke some other language. This, it was concluded, is an example of a neo-Kantian 'human objectivity'. That is, we see the world - its objects, values and facts - from where we are. There is no neutral vantage point; no one fixed description of the world.

Despite this emphasis on the particularity of our language and concepts, Putnam wishes to avoid implications of any radical incommensurability. As we have seen, for Putnam, as with Wittgenstein, our 'ordinary language' and common practices - the things we do and say - are what is important. He argues that, just because we wish to lose certain 'metaphysical' and problematic uses of words (e.g., 'refer'), this does not mean we should lose *all* our uses.

Of course, in a sense, it is our language and practices which Lindbeck also wishes to focus on, and to emphasise their importance. However, Lindbeck's definition of practice is narrower than Putnam's. For Lindbeck, we form particular concepts based on the sort of way of life we have chosen to 'internalize'. But for Putnam it is from the sort of people we are psychologically and biologically, as well as culturally, that our ability to form concepts comes. We have seen that Putnam highlights the way philosophical dispute can cause us to lose the ordinary sense of some of our words and concepts. James Conant says that Putnam "follows Wittgenstein in proposing that philosophical progress will come from a closer examination of our everyday practices of entering and adjudicating claims about what is true and reasonable."¹¹ Putnam himself says that we must "take our lives and our practice seriously in philosophical discussion."¹² This approach is an important facet of Putnam's understanding of pragmatism. We have seen the

¹¹ Conant, Introduction to *RHF*, p. xlix.

¹² Putnam, *RP*, p. 135. This approach is suggestive of David Tracy's theology with its emphasis on 'limit-experiences' which we share as human beings.

various strands in earlier chapters, and Putnam in fact helpfully summarises what he calls the four main 'theses' of pragmatism:

... (1) *antiskepticism*: pragmatists hold that *doubt* requires justification just as much as belief ...; (2) *fallibilism*: pragmatists hold that there is never a metaphysical guarantee to be had that such-and-such a belief will never need revision (that one can be both fallibilistic *and* antiskeptical is perhaps *the* unique insight of American pragmatism); (3) the thesis that there is no *fundamental* dichotomy between "facts" and "values"; and (4) the thesis that, in a certain sense, practice is primary in philosophy.¹³

These theses are key to Putnam's sort of realism, and to his criticisms of deconstructive and 'postmodern' philosophies.

We saw in our discussion of *The Nature of Doctrine* that George Lindbeck too presents a kind of realism by way of his notion of intratextuality; that is, he espouses a narrative realism. If we remove the complications of the question of *which* narrative (for Lindbeck, of course, the important narrative is the one contained in Scripture), there is obviously a clear link to the notion of an internal realism. That is, the idea of story replaces the (impossible) neutral description of the world. This is a non-propositional realism in the sense that it does not depend on a strict correspondence theory of truth. It does not rely on neutral facts in the world which our language somehow 'hooks' on to. We have seen that Putnam has been very critical of propositional realism (as Lindbeck might describe it) for these very reasons. Lindbeck's narrative is also not to be subsumed under a

¹³ Putnam, *W&L*, p. 152.

philosophical meta-narrative and it is not an expression of prelinguistic religious experience. He says that, "the objects available to us in this life are all in some fashion constructed out of ... conceptually or linguistically structured sense-experience."¹⁴ Putnam also believes, of course, that we have no access to 'prelinguistic experience'.

Narrative truth, then for Lindbeck, is truth in a context; true in some actual language *L*. On the surface this also seems to be stating exactly the same position as Putnam. We can only describe reality, what is true, from a particular point of view. However, Putnam, despite the particularity of our viewpoint, believes that there are objective realities, including objective ethical realities.¹⁵ Putnam claims that this is consistent with pragmatism.

As it turns out, though, this does not manage to drive a wedge between Putnam and Lindbeck. As we saw in previous chapters, Lindbeck's postliberalist emphasis on particularity does also include certain *universal* implications. For example, concerning the notion of truth itself, he wants to use Christian concepts (and use them well; propagate their good use, etc.) because he thinks they are *true*. And this does not mean only true for postliberalism or within the Lutheran denomination, but just simply *true*. This sort of universal claim is quite typical of religious beliefs (as Lindbeck is well aware).

¹⁴ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 39.

¹⁵ See for example, *RTH*, p. 142; *RP*, p. 186ff; *W&L*, p. 214f.

There are some more subtle differences though. Putnam takes a pragmatic view of truth. He says that,

... disagreement in individual conceptions of the good need not make it impossible to approximate (even if we never finally arrive at) agreement on just procedures and even agreement on such abstract and formal values as respect for one another's autonomy, non-instrumentalization of other persons....¹⁶

So, there is, he says, no sharp distinction between conceptual (analytical) truth and empirical truth.¹⁷ Putnam points out that "pragmatism was in large part an attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction."¹⁸ As a result, pragmatism also says that, as it happens, *these* values are the ones that are important to us. We might have been different sorts of people, holding different values, but we are not. This again is not to suggest relativism, that our choices are arbitrary or that one ethical point of view is as good as any other.

Lindbeck, on the other hand, takes a descriptive, sort of sociological approach, but which we have already argued has clear theological intent (truth has hidden religious resonances for Lindbeck).

However, perhaps the same criticism could be levelled against Putnam as well, since he thinks that there are ethical truths which are truths for us all? Does

¹⁶ Putnam, *W&L*, p. 155.

¹⁷ Putnam, *W&L*, p. 158.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Putnam have a moral agenda which commits him to foundational truth? Putnam's pragmatism can still rescue him here. This is because the pragmatist emphasis on contingency and fallibilism allows him to say: Yes, we have shared ethical concerns, but we could have been people with different concerns. We just happen, given the sorts of people we actually are, to have these ones.¹⁹ Lindbeck cannot, on the other hand, very easily say that what he proclaims as Christian truth might have been otherwise. However, it would be wrong for this to suggest some form of necessity operating in Lindbeck's account, governing what God can or cannot do. God's particular action is not necessary (in the sense of being constrained to be otherwise) but a result of God's gracious character. However, this observation simply slips the issue back a step: would Lindbeck be able to say that God could be other than gracious?

As we have also already seen, Lindbeck asks us to compare religions to languages or cultures, where these structure human understanding, shaping our lives and thought.²⁰ The canonical texts of the Christian religion provide its adherents with the grammar and vocabulary of faith. This in turn, according to Lindbeck, creates the possibility of theology.²¹ He claims that doctrines (again like grammar) provide a framework for what can and cannot be said. So, becoming religious, as we have seen, is like learning a language. He adds that meaning is therefore

¹⁹ Putnam is sometimes unclear over his use of the word 'we'. Often Putnam uses it broadly (as here) and it seems to mean 'we human beings'; at other times he limits its range, especially when he is talking about moral and political philosophy, to mean 'we Western democrats'.

²⁰ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 33, p. 39 and elsewhere.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

immanent.²² This could clearly be taken as describing an *internalist* viewpoint in Putnam's sense. Meanings, in this view, are specific to the language used by a particular community. Criteria of truth and falsity, sense and nonsense are particular and not universal.

However, Lindbeck has trouble with the notion of immanent or 'internal' meaning. According to David Bryant, for example, Lindbeck does not appreciate some of the complexities involved. Bryant starts off by claiming that postliberalism is inconsistent about historicism. That is, they deny universal standards of rationality (of meaningfulness), but overlook the "interplay between past and present, framework and experience" in how Christian faith is actually articulated.²³ Bryant complains that experience does not get enough of a look-in. Essentially his argument is that there are two ideas at odds with each other in postliberal theology. First, that meaning/rationality is 'immanent' (internal; no transcendental foundations) and secondly, that there is a requirement for an unchanging structure which roots Christian identity. Bryant says,

The rejection of transcendental approaches forces [postliberal theologians] to locate this structure within history, but the desire to identify it as an unchanging structure leads them to deny that this structure is really affected by history.²⁴

²² Ibid., p. 114.

²³ Bryant, p. 31.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

Putnam is more flexible about the interplay between experience and language, fact and value. In his explication of internal realism, one of the key threads is Putnam's claim that there is an *interpenetration* of fact and value. The term 'interpenetration' is used rather than 'interdependence' to "emphasize that the interdependence of which I speak is *not* [one] of elements which can always be distinguished, even notionally."²⁵ A strict separation of fact and value has allowed a lack of respect for the place of value because of the hegemony of fact (based on a 'scientific' or modern view of the world). Putnam, as was seen in Chapter Two, is not content simply to make a small place for values in the big world of facts.

The modern view of a *religion* could also be seen as a small world of particular values which has little current currency in the ('real') world of facts. So Putnam's arguments for what he calls the interpenetration of fact and value could obviously be a potential help for theology. However, it would seem for a postliberal theologian like Lindbeck (and even more strongly for someone like Bruce Marshall), that facts are strictly to be read *through* the values of a particular community. As we have seen, Lindbeck claims that a "scriptural world ... supplies the interpretative framework within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality."²⁶ There is much more of a one-way street here compared to

²⁵ Putnam, *Pr.*, p. 57. His example here is the sentence, "In the 1940's, Walter Giesecking played unaccompanied Bach and Mozart piano music with an amazing sensitivity to all the nuances, and without a trace of inappropriate bravura." This is a case where 'factual' and 'value' judgements are very difficult to disentangle. Putnam says "I have described Giesecking's playing and, as we say, expressed my appreciation of it." (Ibid.)

²⁶ Lindbeck, *TND*, p. 117.

what Putnam has said about the interrelation of fact and value. Significantly, according to Putnam, the interrelation he describes neither should undermine what we think of as a 'fact' and plunge us into scepticism, nor change our conception of 'value'. However, for Lindbeck, it looks like a form of reductionism is going on, reducing 'fact' to (Christian, Scriptural) value. This is because the uniqueness of Christianity is of great importance for Lindbeck. Putnam, on the other hand, points out that the removal of the fact/value dichotomy breaks down certain other distinctions. He says,

Recognizing the entanglement of fact and value, as well as of science and ethics, science and metaphysics, analytic and synthetic, is here to stay may also help us to see our way past another contemporary shibboleth: the supposed incompatibility of universalist (or "enlightenment") and parochial values.²⁷

Another connection between postliberalism and internal realism, specifically with regard to Putnam's earlier philosophy, is in the way he talks about *choosing* a conceptual scheme. Similarly it looks as if something like this is the case for Lindbeck: we choose to enter into, learn and internalise Christian truth and then we interpret the world by using its categories. In fact, Lindbeck does talk about simply "picking" a conceptual scheme.²⁸ However, as we saw in Chapter Two, this notion of choice is problematic for Putnam, and drops out of his later descriptions of internal realism.

²⁷ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 177.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

However, even if we proceed along these lines and continue to attempt to talk of 'choosing' a conceptual scheme, it still remains mysterious on the postliberal account as to *why* we should choose Christianity out of all our conceptual choices. But Lindbeck is well aware of the potential difficulty here. He says that the fact that there is no neutral language with which to describe the world "does not reduce the choice between different frameworks to whim or chance."²⁹ A postliberal theologian does not have to give up a notion of *reasonableness*. Lindbeck continues,

As T. S. Kuhn has argued in reference to science, and Wittgenstein in philosophy, the norms of reasonableness are too rich and subtle to be adequately specified in any general theory of reason or knowledge. These norms ... are like the rules of depth grammar, which linguists search for and may at times approximate but never grasp. Thus reasonableness in religion and theology ... has something of that aesthetic character, that quality of unformalizable skill, which we normally associate with the artist or the linguistically competent.³⁰

However, this idea of 'reasonableness' is a strange one. Lindbeck seems to be saying that a skilled speaker within the Christian faith shows - simply by virtue of being thus skilled - a '*reasonableness*'. This reasonableness is, in turn, used to justify (or at least help make intelligible) the faith. However, if we change the context, does this mean that a good Nazi (someone who has internalised and performs well the beliefs of Nazism) is somehow communicating to us a '*reasonableness*' about those beliefs? Of course, this turns on what we mean here

²⁹ Ibid., p. 130.

³⁰ Ibid.

by 'reasonableness'. If it simply means being able to provide arguments (of whatever sort) or reasons (no matter how morally dubious) then Lindbeck's point still stands.

Behind this puzzle, though, is the whole question of the origin and authority of religious concepts. We have already noted that it becomes mysterious in Lindbeck's account as to why someone should 'interiorize' Christian concepts. It seems Lindbeck must eventually rely on a Barthian idea of revelation, even if this is implicit rather than explicit. On the other hand, Putnam shows himself to have strong naturalist tendencies (and as early as *Reason, Truth and History*). This, then, could inform a 'theology with a human face', a theology which indeed "starts where we are" in Fergus Kerr's phrase. Putnam says,

Our conceptions of coherence and acceptability are, on the view I shall develop, deeply interwoven with our psychology. They depend on our biology and our culture; they are by no means 'value free'. But they are our conceptions, and they are conceptions of something real.³¹

Putnam is aware of the possible pitfalls of a naive naturalism. He is clear he is not espousing anything which could be called 'natural law'.³² He points out that natural law is, in fact, a concept which pragmatists have always (and rightly in his opinion) viewed very suspiciously. This is because it is a concept which "has provided rationalizations for the interests of privileged groups."³³ Justification for

³¹ Ibid.

³² Putnam, *W&L*, p. 160.

³³ Ibid. p. 161.

our ethical practices must, says Putnam, always be subject to examination through experiment (using pragmatic criteria for 'better' and 'worse') and on the basis of a fallibilist position.

Lindbeck does not share Putnam's naturalism. For him, bedrock is not psychology or biology, but always language and culture. In a sense Lindbeck could be seen, then, as a more successful 'internalist' than Putnam! (As we have already noted in earlier chapters, Putnam now says he dislikes the title 'internal'.) However, there is still always the suspicion that lurking behind 'language' and 'culture' for Lindbeck is a revealed truth. (This is surely the role that 'the Christian narrative' plays in Lindbeck's postliberal theology.)

Another alternative open to Lindbeck, though, is a more pragmatic approach, which could be seen as more in line with Putnam. That is, a postliberal theologian could still claim that Christian concepts rely for their authority on their *assimilative power* (calculated over the long term). This can, I think, be tied in with what Putnam says about 'coherence' and 'fit' of beliefs.³⁴ In *Reason, Truth and History*, Putnam claims that,

What makes a statement, or a whole system of statements - theory or conceptual scheme - rationally acceptable is, in large part, its coherence and fit; coherence of 'theoretical' or less experiential beliefs with one another and with more experiential beliefs, and also coherence of experiential beliefs with theoretical beliefs.³⁵

³⁴ Putnam, *RTH* p. 54f.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Similarly, ‘assimilative power’ does bring in a form of rational justification, even if postliberalism denies that there is a universal, foundational rationality.

A possible difficulty, though, for the notion of ‘assimilative power’ is that an important part of the picture that Lindbeck and his postliberal colleagues want to paint of Christianity is that of it having a *unique voice*. In many ways it is easy to find this an appealing view of Christianity as it has surely often been at its best when it has been challenging existing cultural *mores*, being politically subversive, and fighting its corner against the odds. As Placher describes it, “Confronted by our culture’s standards of what makes sense and what doesn’t, postliberal theology invites Christians to say, ‘We don’t look at things that way,’ and to nurture communities that offer an alternative vision.”³⁶ Certainly Lindbeck often paints this sort of picture of Christianity. It is embattled and marginalised *because* it has its own distinctive voice. This is why Lindbeck is so keen to have people learn to speak the language well; for it to become a native tongue for as many as possible.

The problem is that this idea of uniqueness is at odds with the notion of assimilative power. This is for reasons similar to Bryant’s objections which were discussed above.³⁷ Lindbeck’s view that different cultures may be incommensurable also makes matters much worse. That is, a truly unique voice

³⁶ Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, p. 19.

³⁷ More general problems with the notion of ‘assimilative power’ have already been discussed in the previous chapter.

(which may hold truths to be incommensurate with some or all other discourses) would not have enough in common with other discourses to be able to 'assimilate' them.³⁸ It would simply fail to understand any other voice.

It is clear that Putnam's philosophy and Lindbeck's theology do have threads in common. However, what separates them fundamentally is disagreement about the incommensurability of languages. They are both conceptual relativists, but Putnam's pragmatism and naturalism draws a line between their positions. Languages for Putnam are commensurable because, as human beings, we share many forms of common behaviour (including linguistic behaviour) and interests. Putnam, as we saw, also questions the intelligibility of adopting 'incommensurability' as a thesis. Ultimately again, there is a difference over the question of where our concepts come from. For Putnam, they come from the sorts of people (in the broadest sense) that we happen to be. For Lindbeck, and despite all his appropriation of social anthropology, our concepts are ultimately provided by God, that is, from the biblical categories provided by the Christian framework. If Lindbeck could adopt a more liberal view of concept-formation and drop his claim that languages may be incommensurable, then he could follow Putnam's line more closely. As we saw in the previous discussion of David Tracy's theology, this is something which Lindbeck is not prepared to do.

³⁸ There is also a 'view from nowhere' approach in Lindbeck - i.e., to be able to claim uniqueness. This cannot simply be a description.

6.3 An 'Empathetic Understanding'

We referred very briefly to Putnam's notion of 'empathetic understanding' at the end of Chapter Three. This was at the end of the discussion of Putnam's analysis of Wittgenstein on religious belief. There he dismisses the view that Wittgenstein is suggesting some sort of incommensurability thesis. We saw that Putnam goes on to commend Wittgenstein's talk of "trust" in language and conversation, and the importance of very basic shared beliefs and practices. It is this which forms the basis for an 'empathetic understanding'.

Putnam's other main reference comes in an autobiographical introduction to a series of lectures given at the University of Bologna.³⁹ At the start of these lectures, he complains that:

Any intellectual who lets his friends know that he attends religious services - as I do - occasionally runs into astoundingly intolerant reactions from secular intellectuals ... As a practising Jew, though not an orthodox one, I know that religious belief can seem like a species of lunacy to one's secular friends.⁴⁰

We already know of some of Putnam's religious interests and of his Jewish background from part of the content of his 1990 Gifford Lectures. There Putnam

³⁹ These lectures, on the subject of 'The University and Social Change', were subsequently published as 'Aloft with Freedom's Banner', which has already been referred to.

⁴⁰ Putnam, 'Aloft with Freedom's Banner', p. 13.

says he is less likely nowadays to keep his 'religious life' and 'academic life' as strictly compartmentalised as he has done in the past.⁴¹ He goes on to say,

What I object to in the kind of intolerance I describe is not [at] all the conclusion - that religious belief is no longer tenable. That could be anyone's conclusion, no matter how thoroughly he or she empathized with the point of view of the religious person. Indeed, it could at any time be the conclusion of the religious person - because in today's world, faith lives in a dialectic with doubt, as Kierkegaard put it. What I object to is the lack of any empathetic understanding; the inability to see why the charge that I believe in a "gaseous vertebrate", as Haeckel put it, simply passes me by; the inability to see the *religious point of view*, at least as I - and I think most contemporary religious people - inhabit it.⁴²

We have seen throughout this thesis that there can be an immense difficulty of such understanding between people with very different beliefs. This provides an explanation in part for the current appeal of 'postmodern' theologies, and has resulted in the different competing methodologies in contemporary theology and different approaches to (for example) inter-religious dialogue. Putnam himself talks about the "possibility of making oneself conscious of other modes of human fulfilment and the terrible difficulty of doing this".⁴³

However Putnam wants us to continue to strive towards as much mutual understanding as possible.⁴⁴ He says,

.. today even we who value enlightenment can see that there is more to enlightenment than purposive rationality... One

⁴¹ Putnam, *RP*, p. 1.

⁴² Putnam, 'Aloft with Freedom's Banner', p. 13.

⁴³ Putnam, *W&L*, p. 186.

⁴⁴ As is the case for Lindbeck too, of course. It is not the claim of this thesis that Lindbeck *wants* any 'ghettoisation' of particular positions.

good reason for not despising tradition is that after three or four centuries of “modern is better”, we have reached a position in which we can find that a knowledge of tradition offers us not a straightjacket but a widening of our sense of what is possible.⁴⁵

We must not overstate the differences between us. An important connected question for Putnam, and one he has claimed to be increasingly central to philosophers, is whether ethics is to be construed as “universalistic or should rather be rooted in the forms of life of particular traditional cultures.”⁴⁶ Part of the problem is the sheer complexity of the interplay between the two. Putnam also says that a ‘*universal ethic*’ (which he believes is possible) has often been confused with the likelihood of finding a ‘*universal way of life*’, a confusion resulting from Enlightenment optimism. (A ‘*universal ethic*’ for Putnam here is a moral fact or principle.)

Putnam thinks this confusion is very unfortunate. For a start, he says, we cannot assume an Enlightenment *way of life*, even if we want to say that certain values dominate western culture, and to assume that that way of life would be best for everybody to adopt. He cites, for example, George Steiner’s deep questioning of Enlightenment values in the context of the Holocaust.⁴⁷ That is, Steiner believes that we cannot now assume that our western framework provides us with the stability needed to assess its own concepts. As we saw in Chapter One, Putnam

⁴⁵ Putnam, ‘Judaism and Jewish Identity’ in *Jewish Identity*, (eds.) David T. Goldberg and Michael Krausz, Philadelphia, 1993 p. 112.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 182.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

dismisses the objection that it could be merely that we have failed to live up to the values of the Enlightenment and that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with those values. Firstly he says that the values themselves are just simply not clear enough. Secondly, the fact that there has been a continued failure to live up to the values suggests that they are insufficient themselves in some way.⁴⁸

Putnam claims that the confusion of 'universal ethic' and 'universal way of life' by philosophers led to Utopian thinking, that is, the widespread assumption that the one would lead to the other. This put severe pressure on those wishing to preserve their own culture or tradition. Utopian/Enlightenment thinking suggests there is some neutral, technical solution to everything and this leads to traditions becoming marginalised. He says, "In the light of these facts, is it to be wondered at if many people began to feel that much of what they valued in their traditions - and above all their religious beliefs and their sense of their own history - was in peril?"⁴⁹

The maintaining of culture and traditions is obviously very important, says Putnam. He says that people who are concerned to preserve a tradition should not be written off as 'reactionary' (by us more Enlightened people is the implication). What they are doing can be valuable. Putnam thinks we (Western thinkers) have had too narrow a view of the wealth of cultural diversity. The possibility and advantage of one language, one world culture, has been a seductive thought for us.⁵⁰ While this

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 184.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 185.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

sort of Utopian thinking is now to be rejected, its rejection leads to another problem. Putnam points out that if the “idea of a universal ethic leads ... to the idea of a universal way of life, then there are many thinkers who would advocate *modus tollendo tollens*: since a universal way of life is a bad idea, so is a universal ethic.”⁵¹

This line of reasoning is to embrace relativism, says Putnam. It means that every way of life is to be considered equally good. Putnam rejects the idea that traditional communities have concepts ‘thick’ (to adopt Geertz’s terminology much used by Lindbeck) enough to produce and maintain a whole system of ‘internal’ ethics. This is, of course, Lindbeck’s argument for his cultural-linguistic model of religion. Putnam, however, says that “the whole idea of a culture which has only ‘thick’ ethical concepts and no ‘thin’ ones is a philosopher’s myth.”⁵²

Putnam goes on to say that traditions also have philosophical concepts of their own, a point made in the previous section. That is, they contain “conceptions about how *everyone* should live.”⁵³ He goes onto say that,

The impossibility of discussing ethical problems without assuming the value framework of a particular culture, if it is an impossibility, suggests the impossibility of any significant notion of a “universal” or “eternal” existential problem. Yet every sane person does believe deep down that there are universal human problems.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 188.

⁵² Ibid. p. 191.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 191.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Again, this is not to say that there is one possible good way of life. However, to say that there are *alternative* good ways of life is not to be a relativist. On this point Putnam quotes Isaiah Berlin at length, which I reproduce here:

Communities may resemble each other in many respects, but the Greeks differ from Lutheran Germans, the Chinese differ from both; what they strive after, and what they fear or worship is scarcely ever similar.

This view has been called cultural or moral relativism ... It is not relativism. Members of one culture can, by force of imaginative insight, understand (what Vico called *entrare*) the values, the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remote in time or space. They may find those values unacceptable, but if they open their minds sufficiently they can grasp how one might be a whole human being with whom one could communicate, and at the same time live in the light of values different from one's own, but which nevertheless one can see to be values, ends of life, by the realization of which men [sic] could be fulfilled.⁵⁵

This concept of '*entrare*' is clearly what Putnam means by 'empathetic understanding'. Putnam goes on to say that the importance of *entrare* is, again, not to say that every way of life is equally as good. "But not to *entrare* is, in the most important sense of the term, not to be what I wish to call a 'cultured person'."⁵⁶ This line of thought is, however, underdeveloped in Putnam's work. That is, Putnam has strong *intuitions* but provides little in terms of actual argument.⁵⁷ It is a conclusion of this thesis that more work should be done in fleshing out these intuitions about an 'empathetic understanding'.

⁵⁵ Quoted by Putnam in 'Aloft with Freedom's Banner', p. 15. The quotation is from Isaiah Berlin, 'On the Pursuit of the Ideal' in the *New York Review of Books*, March 17th 1988, p. 14.

⁵⁶ Putnam, 'Aloft with Freedom's Banner', p. 13.

⁵⁷ This tendency in some of Putnam's positive philosophy is also pointed out by Joseph Margolis in 'Comparing Dummett's and Putnam's Realisms', *Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 177, October 1994, pp. 519-527.

An important point Putnam makes is that he says what we often find most difficult is to imaginatively enter our own culture. This shows an appreciation of the complexity of 'the' culture we inhabit, a fact that Lindbeck glosses over with his talk of 'the Christian narrative' and 'religion'. Room for the critical voice within is a problem for Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model. Putnam points out that internal conflicts "are hard to bear; but the refusal to understand imaginatively one or another part of one's own culture is often a refusal to understand oneself."⁵⁸

However, do we then just choose the way of life, or cultural tradition, we like? Putnam refers to William James in considering his answer to this. While James argued for pluralism and against dogmatism, he "famously (or notoriously, depending on your point of view) defended the right to believe."⁵⁹ Putnam claims we often make decisions - ethical and otherwise - based on what James called our 'passional nature'.

This, like Putnam's claim above (about our beliefs 'deep down') is of course open to the most severe 'deconstructionist' suspicion and criticism. It could surely be seen as a dogmatic, ideological statement itself. Putnam, though, says there is a pragmatic answer. It is far too simple to say that human history has provided several (or perhaps several million!) 'optimal' ways of life, and we just choose the

⁵⁸ Putnam, *W&L*, p. 193.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

one we like. These ways of life, even when we can differentiate them, have complexities, inner contradictions, obvious “defects as well as virtues”.⁶⁰ We see these defects both from inside our own culture and outside the other. This is possible “as the result of increased knowledge and/or a widened sense of justice.”⁶¹ We cannot and should not say of any way of life that it has got it completely right, that it is ‘optimal’. In fact, according to Putnam we do not know of *any* actual optimal way of life.

So, our mission is to reform our own way of life as we can. Putnam says there “is nothing wrong with the choice of a person who chooses to stay within a traditional way and to try to make it as good and as just and as fulfilling as possible - as long as he or she does not try to force that way on everyone else.”⁶² But what criteria do we use to judge ‘better’ or ‘worse’ ways of living? Putnam answers the objection that there can be no such criteria. He says,

This objection overlooks [a] feature of the pragmatist position; we do not, in fact, start from the position of “doubting everything”. As long as discussion is still possible, as long as one is not facing coercion or actual violence or total refusal to discuss, the participants in actual discussion always share a large number of both factual assumptions and value assumptions that are not in question in the specific dispute.⁶³

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 175f.

He goes on to say that, "Very often, parties to a disagreement can agree that the disagreement has, in fact, been resolved, not by appeal to a universal set of "criteria", but by appeal to values which are not in question in *that* dispute."⁶⁴

This, of course, says Putnam, is democracy. Truth is a public matter, open to discussion and debate. He says this sort of liberal, democratic ethic might seem dull to many people. "To this the reply must be that the desire for views which are 'exciting', 'original,' 'radical', views which 'deconstruct' everything which we thought before, is not in general the same as the desire for truth."⁶⁵ However, traditions are also not hewn in stone. Putnam believes that "a tradition that is not constantly reappropriated and reinterpreted becomes fossilized."⁶⁶ Naturally, to the extent that Putnam takes this measured, pragmatic approach, he is absolutely modern.

The emphasis on reform, and the (re)interpretation of culture, ties Putnam more to liberal rather than postliberal theology, and especially the 'revisionist' theology of David Tracy.⁶⁷ This is what the remainder of this chapter will discuss. It will

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 176.

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 196.

⁶⁶ Putnam, 'Judaism and Jewish Identity', p. 115.

⁶⁷ Putnam actually refers favourably to Tracy in 'Judaism and Jewish Identity', p. 109. He picks up on Tracy's emphasis on a plurality of voices both in Scripture and in the interpretation of Scripture.

suggest that Tracy is likely to be key in the formation of a 'theology with a human face'.⁶⁸

As we have seen, Tracy's theology is extremely wide-ranging, and it is currently difficult to predict where it might go.⁶⁹ Tracy was brought in as a foil to Lindbeck in Chapter Five to provide a defence of the theological position characterised as 'experiential-expressivism' by Lindbeck, and much criticised in *The Nature of Doctrine*. So it is Tracy's earlier output, and his long theological debate with Lindbeck, which has been the focus of consideration for this work. It is to this we shall return, but also to more recent sources, to consider briefly whether Tracy's alternative theological outlook can provide a useful dialogue with Putnam's philosophy.

David Tracy does, on the surface, differ from Putnam in that he broadly accepts that our current situation is 'postmodern' rather than modern.⁷⁰ Latterly he has seen this as an chance for theology to be able to forge its own distinctive path, much as is the hope of the postliberal theologians we have looked at, Lindbeck, Marshall and Placher. Tracy says this postmodern context, and the new theological approaches it can engender, may give a fresh opportunity for "God as

⁶⁸ Given that it has not been the purpose of this thesis to provide a comprehensive analysis of Tracy's theology the considerations here will be necessarily provisional, but will provide grounds for further research.

⁶⁹ There do continue to be consistent broad themes *throughout* Tracy's theology, even in the most recent.

⁷⁰ See for example, p. 78 *P&A* and p.1 *DO*

God to be heard again".⁷¹ Themes picked up by Tracy in his recent theology include hope and the hiddenness of God;⁷² cross and negativity;⁷³ love and gift.⁷⁴

An important aspect of postmodernity, according to Tracy, is that it also gives a voice to those who have been marginalised by modernity. He is unhappy with the modern project, which he defines as saying that, "All reality must be disciplined by modern thought, including the reality of God and religion."⁷⁵ By 'disciplined' he means that everything is brought under the authority of the modern metanarrative. In effect Tracy is saying that modernity absorbs theology in the same way that postliberals claim religious truth should. That is, the one must 'discipline' the other, and this is not a good situation.

However, Tracy cannot be called straightforwardly a 'postmodern theologian'. In his essay, 'On Naming the Present', he lists the various alternative descriptions open to us at this time as being 'modern', 'anti-modern' (in which he includes Lindbeck's postliberalism) and 'post-modern'.⁷⁶ Tracy says that ultimately all three fail in some way to describe completely the intellectual and social situation we find ourselves in today. He is also clear, however, that there are important

⁷¹ David Tracy, 'The Return of God in Contemporary Theology' in *Why Theology?*, *Concilium* 1994/6, p. 38.

⁷² David Tracy, 'Tendresse et violence de Dieu: le retour du Dieu caché dans la théologie contemporaine' in *Lumière et Vie* number 226, Vol. XLV -1, February 1996, pp. 63-74.

⁷³ Tracy, 'The Return of God', p. 43.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p. 44.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 41. In fact, of course, the modern project would more likely entirely *dismiss* (rather than 'discipline') God and religion as a pseudo-issue.

⁷⁶ David Tracy, 'On naming the Present' in *On the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, *Concilium* 1990/1, p. 66.

truths to be found in each alternative description. In the case of modernity, Tracy approvingly cites both Habermas' proposal of the "reality of reason as communicative counter-movements" and also "the drive to a Jamesian cultural pluralism and genuine political democracy."⁷⁷

'Anti-modernity' is, as it sounds, a negative reaction against modernity. The first anti-modern response, says Tracy, is fundamentalism; the second, neo-conservatism, which includes the postliberal theology of Lindbeck. He calls neo-conservatism "honourable" and says it deserves respect. He says one of its main achievements has been the important emphasis on the function of Biblical narrative in the formation of Christian identity.⁷⁸ However, Tracy does not approve of the neo-conservatives' wholesale rejection of what he sees as more commendable aspects of modernity, and he also criticises the neo-conservatives for their partial readings of the classic theological texts.⁷⁹ They fail to realise that there is no innocent tradition.⁸⁰ Tracy goes on to say, "For the anti-moderns ours is a time to retreat to a past which never was and a tradition whose presumed purity belies the very meaning of tradition as concrete and ambiguous history."⁸¹

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 71.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 76.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Tracy says modernity, which has also become just one more tradition, fails to see this too. (Ibid., p. 70.)

⁸¹ Tracy, 'On Naming the Present'. p. 66. Tracy's criticisms of 'anti-modernity' tie in with Putnam's discussion of Alasdair MacIntyre's philosophy. In MacIntyre there is a retreat to what Putnam dismissively calls a 'Golden Age'. (Putnam, *RP*, p. 185.)

The valuable aspects of *postmodernity*, according to Tracy, are its rejection of the modern self and of the modern God's Eye View, and, more positively, its emphasis on resistance and on genuine otherness. However, he concludes that "the postmoderns too often offer an honourable resistance to ... modern self-illusions only to inform their resistance with a hope that seems little more than nihilism with a happy ending."⁸²

Tracy has revisited these themes more recently and says that the difficulty for us is that both 'modernity' and 'postmodernity' are deeply ambiguous concepts.⁸³ Here he seems to appreciate that our context is broadly modern. He refers to "we moderns" and concedes that,

All of us who speak an emancipatory, liberating language are moderns at heart. As are all who demand public reason for theology. As are all of us who will always remain, in our lives as much as our thoughts, believers in the democratic ideals of liberty and equality.⁸⁴

However, Tracy goes on to say that, despite this, "we are now facing not simply (as almost all concede) late modernity but a puzzling reality named 'postmodernity'".⁸⁵ But he admits much clarification is needed of the meanings of both 'modernity' and 'post'. Tracy claims modernity is ambiguous because it has proved to be that which it tried to replace - just one more tradition (and not a

⁸² Tracy, 'On Naming the Present', p. 79.

⁸³ David Tracy, 'Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity' in *Theology Today*, Vol. 51 No. 1, April 1994, p. 104.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 105..

neutral or 'innocent' one either).⁸⁶ Postmodernity is also ambiguous which is why we must pursue it with critique and suspicion. Part of the reason for our suspicion is that postmodernity is clearly underdefined ethically.⁸⁷ Despite this, Tracy says that postmodernity at its best is a valuable ethical response to modern ambiguity because it provides an ethics of resistance. Tracy finally concludes that theology "will never ... be tameable by a system - any system - modern or premodern or postmodern."⁸⁸

Tracy's own ambiguity over the proper and most helpful description of our current situation is a useful reminder of its difficult nature. It also suggests that the amount of thought Tracy has put into analysing 'modern' and 'postmodern' strands in contemporary thought, means that he is less likely to adopt any position in an uncritical manner. Furthermore, it also suggests he occupies a similar position to Putnam - critical of many aspects of modernity yet unwilling to say that modernity is a dead issue. Richard Lints has summed up (correctly I think) Tracy's position. He states:

Tracy is postmodern largely in his rejection of the Enlightenment view of human experience as objective, neutral and dispassionate. Tracy is thoroughly modern in his concern to correlate the gospel with human experience though now this experience is understood in a deeply pluralistic fashion.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 106.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 107.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 114.

⁸⁹ Richard Lints, 'The Postpositivist Choice: Tracy or Lindbeck?' in *JAAR* Winter 1993, Vol. LXI, No. 4, p. 659.

This reflection on the nature of human experience brings us to the second potential link between Putnam and Tracy. This is the suggestion that there are grounds for a potentially fruitful comparison between Putnam and Tracy as they both believe many of our concepts are based in who we are in a very broad sense, i.e., as human beings. We have already seen that Putnam is keen to remind his philosophical colleagues that philosophy is a humanity.⁹⁰ Tracy also presents a theology which is also a humanity. This can be seen in Tracy's liberal emphasis on human experience, and his promoting of conversation and discourse (including his idea of conversation with a 'classic' text). Furthermore, there is an important emphasis in both Putnam and Tracy's work on the use of imagination and sympathy in order to understand that which may be alien.

This second point ties in with Tracy's whole 'revisionist' theological programme. The revisionist model of theology is, as Tracy describes it in *Blessed Rage for Order*, "philosophical reflection upon the meanings present in common human experience and language, and upon the meanings present in the Christian fact".⁹¹ There are two main sources for theology according to Tracy - the raw data that the theologian will work with. Firstly, *texts* (which we have seen he defines very broadly to include tradition and practice) and, secondly, *common human experience and language*. The main theological methods are therefore, claims Tracy,

⁹⁰ See, for example, *RHF*, p. xvi; *RP*, p. x. The title page to *RHF* includes a quotation from Wittgenstein "Let us be human" (from *Culture and Value*).

⁹¹ David Tracy, *BRO*, p. 43.

phenomenology and hermeneutics.⁹² It is 'revisionist' because it is a process of interpretation and reinterpretation, a re-visioning both of Christianity and of our experience. Putnam too is this sort of revisionist in his philosophy, a result of the pragmatist emphasis on revisable truths (fallibilism), and his belief that philosophy should be criticism of culture.

Of course, it should be noted immediately that the concept of 'common human experience' is potentially open to the most severe criticism.⁹³ If we accept that our language and experience are rooted in social contexts, that there is no 'God's eye view', then 'common human experience' could undoubtedly mean simply 'people like us', and therefore potentially be an expression of ideology and power. Tracy says it is "that immediate experience of the self-as-self which can be reflectively mediated through such disciplines as art, history, cultural analysis, human scientific analysis, and philosophical analysis."⁹⁴ While this description may be over-intellectualised, importantly there are what Tracy refers to as 'limit experiences' which link all human beings and cultures. This is what Tracy and Putnam share: a belief that in all cultures there are experiences of death, suffering, birth, joy, guilt, sadness, etc. which are part of the human condition. Both philosophy and theology should reflect (and reflect on) these sorts of limit experiences. Again, this is suggestive of a 'theology with a human face', with further work to be done exploring the interpretation of such experiences.

⁹² Tracy, *BRO*, p.47. Cf. Wm. James

⁹³ We have considered these criticisms in Chapters Four and Five.

⁹⁴ Tracy, *BRO*, p. 69.

Gareth Jones has claimed recently that, as a result of his revisionist methodology, Tracy “comes closer than anyone to articulating the genuine conditions of [the] possibility of critical theology in modernity and postmodernity.”⁹⁵ However, Jones points out that Tracy himself sees a major problem for his project. That is, Tracy admits that, “The reflective discipline needed to decide upon the cognitive claims of religion and theism will itself have to be able to account not merely for some particular dimension of experience but *all experience* as such.”⁹⁶

This, Jones says, means that “any theological model must have as its philosophical foundation an understanding of human existence which does justice to the existence *per se*, and not simply the Christian Church *per accidens*.”⁹⁷ Jones admits that this is a “tall order”. However, he goes on to say that,

If a theology is to be genuinely critical, rather than simply parochial, then it has to accept this challenge. Failure to do so is failure to take seriously the world beyond the churches, which is not without redemption and which is full of hidden ... grace.⁹⁸

Tracy’s theology does also answer his critics about ‘common human nature’ to some degree through his notions of ‘analogy’ and ‘conversation’. That is, experience is not necessarily private. People, languages and cultures, while they may be very different, are all experiences able to be entered by imagination,

⁹⁵ Gareth Jones, *Critical Theology: Questions of Truth and Method*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 133.

⁹⁶ Tracy, *BRO*, p. 55.

⁹⁷ Jones, *ibid*.

⁹⁸ Jones, *ibid*.

reflection and conversation which is public. It is not at all obvious that Tracy believes experience to be non-linguistic (although talk of “immediate experience” above may raise suspicions). He clearly says in *Plurality and Ambiguity* (and repeated elsewhere) that “all understanding is linguistic through and through”.⁹⁹

Tracy sees the contemporary situation as fragmented and pluralistic and so says that the difficulty is that theology needs to find conceptual language adequate to the situation.¹⁰⁰ Tracy believes that there are two languages available for our use - one ‘analogical’ and the other, ‘dialectical’. Analogy “is a language of ordered relationships articulating similarity-in-difference.”¹⁰¹ He goes on to say,

I acknowledge that I and the others who are trying to formulate “an analogical imagination” as one strategy for envisioning religious pluralism must be not only wary but downright suspicious of how easily claims to “analogy” or “similarity” can become subtle evasions of the other and the different. Similarity cannot be a cover-word for the rule of the same. Hence we still need to remind ourselves linguistically of this great danger by speaking not of “analogies” simply as “similarities” but of analogies as always similarities-in-difference.”¹⁰²

So what Tracy is proposing is not a straightforward and simplistic universalism. *Conversation* is the key: it allows particularities to retain their self-identity. He says,

... the particularity of each tradition will gain an intensity as its own focal meaning becomes clearer to itself and others... Each self-identity, in the self-respect of its own particularity, will find itself anew by releasing itself to a self-exposure of

⁹⁹ Tracy, *P&A*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁰ Tracy, *AI*, p. 408.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Tracy *DO*, p. 42.

conversation with the others. That each will be changed by that conversation seems assured.¹⁰³

Putnam also ties this in with the critique of modernism:

If new exegeses and new critical interpretations are always necessary, if there is no convergence to One True Interpretation, then, by the same token, the fashion of seeing the interpretations of past centuries as *wholly* superseded by contemporary “insights” may be recognized as the naive progressivism that it is. Perhaps we can come to see criticism as a conversation with many voices rather than a contest with winners and losers.¹⁰⁴

We saw earlier in this chapter a description of Putnam’s idea of ‘empathetic understanding’. This imaginative entering of someone else’s world is not exactly the same as Tracy’s ‘Analogical Imagination’. However, looking for similarities while acknowledging difference is important for both. And this is what Tracy says will happen in authentic conversation.

Tracy’s commitment to dialogue and conversation also avoids any facile reductionism. We have seen that Lindbeck’s emphasis on the particularity of belief makes for a one-way conversation (monologue). Werner Jeanrond, who was a student of Tracy’s, is critical of this aspect of Lindbeck’s postliberalism. He says,

... I fail to see how Lindbeck can develop criteria for a critique of one particular tradition and its inherent ideologies without subscribing, at least in some form, to a global conversation. The focus on intratextuality cannot take adequate care of the need to understand the other, not only the other who is outside our preferred tradition, but

¹⁰³ Tracy, *AI*, p. 450.

¹⁰⁴ Putnam, *RHF*, p. 212.

even the other who may be hidden in our own tradition or even in myself.¹⁰⁵

This of course echoes what Putnam has said about the difficulty of ‘entering’ our own culture.

An outcome of the present thesis is that we now may be able to pursue the possibility of a ‘theology with a human face’. We have identified the appropriation of particular ‘postmodern’ strands of contemporary thought in theology and considered the work of Hilary Putnam as a philosopher who accepts criticism of modernity but avoids a slide into scepticism and relativism. In this respect Putnam’s breaking down of a strict fact/value dichotomy is of great importance to theology.

In this final chapter we have finally rejected George Lindbeck’s postliberal theological programme, which is the main negative conclusion of this thesis. It has lastly been suggested for further research that Tracy and Putnam may provide a fruitful dialogue through further consideration of the concepts of ‘analogical imagination’ and ‘empathetic understanding’. ‘Theology with a human face’ is not a quest for metaphysical absolutes (seen through Putnam’s internal realist critique). However, it should be a theology which shuns relativism and scepticism through

¹⁰⁵ Werner G. Jeanrond, ‘Theology in the Context of Pluralism and Postmodernity: David Tracy’s Theological Method’ in *Postmodernism, Literature and the Future of Theology*, (ed.) Jasper

avoiding any acceptance of incommensurability. It will therefore avoid a ghetto of self-description.

Tracy believes that in our contemporary situation, the choices “become stark”.¹⁰⁶

He describes these choices as:

... retrenchment [in our traditions] (enter fundamentalism); flight (enter relativism); or what Paul Ricoeur nicely named a “second naïveté” towards one’s tradition (enter critical philosophy and revisionary theology) allied to a genuine openness to otherness and difference.¹⁰⁷

Putnam also refers to a ‘second’ or ‘deliberate’ or ‘cultivated’ naïveté.¹⁰⁸ Both Putnam and Tracy mark this for further and very necessary work. Tracy warns if we cannot take this revisionary path, “we are all lost in a Hobbesian state of war of all against all.”¹⁰⁹ Putnam says,

The difficulty is in seeing how such a move in the direction of deliberate “naïveté” can possibly help after three centuries of modern philosophy ... The problem is to *show the possibility* of a return to what I call ‘deliberate naïveté’ and what James called ‘natural realism’. Nevertheless, it seems to me that that is the direction in which we need to go.¹¹⁰

Both Tracy and Putnam have shown they appreciate the complexity of the philosophical and theological situation, and are concerned to make some progress, avoiding the impulse to look for certainties; to take part in a conversation which

¹⁰⁶ Tracy, *On Naming the Present*, p.138.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ See Putnam *W&L*, pp. 283f. He also argues for this in his Dewey Lectures.

¹⁰⁹ Tracy, *On Naming the Present*, p.138.

¹¹⁰ Putnam, *W&L*, p. 284.

may force us to change. And, in the end, Tracy also takes a similar pragmatic, and humanistic, approach to Putnam's. Tracy says it simply is the case that "communication could be other than it is, but in fact is not. We reason discursively. We inquire. We converse. We argue. We are human beings, not angels."¹¹¹

The search for a 'theology with a human face' has, I hope, proved a genuine journey. In the issues raised by this thesis there are perennial, very human questions which have not been halted by positivism at the beginning of the century and do not look like being stopped by 'deconstruction', 'nonrealism' or 'postmodernism' at the end of the century.

¹¹¹ Tracy, *P&A*, p. 27.

APPENDIX:

PUBLISHED MATERIAL

The following book review appeared in *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 77, No. 902, March 1996, and is included here with the permission of the Editor.

RENEWING PHILOSOPHY by Hilary Putnam, *Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA. and London, 1992. pp xii+234p.*

Hilary Putnam's Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of St. Andrews in 1990 are the basis for this wide-ranging, extremely readable book (now out in paperback). Putnam is one of the main players in Anglo-American philosophy and the book provides a useful introduction for theologians and others, both to Putnam's own work and to recent philosophical concerns (some of crucial interest to theology). Putnam provides vigorous and incisive arguments against scientific reductionism in Artificial Intelligence and Darwinian theories of representation, and offers criticisms of fashionable relativism, irrationalism and deconstructionism. In the concluding chapters of the book he presents positive appraisals of Wittgenstein on incommensurability and relativism, and of Dewey's political philosophy.

There are also some intriguing snippets of autobiography. Putnam talks of his 'conversion' from being a scientific materialist to being aware of the importance of what he calls 'the religious dimension of life'. He also mentions his Jewish background and how he endeavoured in the past to keep his faith and philosophy quite separate.

The chapters on Wittgenstein are of particular interest to theologians as Putnam considers the issues of incommensurability and relativism in the light of what Wittgenstein has to say about religious belief. He first explores the differing interpretations of Wittgenstein's writings on the subject. The first (and standard) has been that Wittgenstein is pursuing a strict incommensurability thesis. Putnam, however, disagrees and provides strong textual evidence to support his view. A second common interpretation is that Wittgenstein believes

that religious discourse is simply expressive of emotions or attitudes. A third reading is that Wittgenstein is claiming religious language is 'non-cognitive'. Putnam says that Wittgenstein would regard "the first as a useless thing to say, and the second and third as simply wrong." More broadly, then, "Wittgenstein is not saying one of the standard things about religious language." (p. 148)

Wittgenstein wants to contrast how words may mean something (slightly or even completely) different depending on the *context* of their use. For example, Wittgenstein says a person may talk of what happens to them in terms of retribution; another person doesn't. He says they think entirely differently. However, they do not *contradict* each other because they have quite different ideas. Religious beliefs also have a regulatory nature. The belief of the religious person is characterised by what Wittgenstein sees as its 'unshakeability'. (Putnam points out this is something that Wittgenstein picks up from his reading of the theology of Kierkegaard.)

But is there enough to protect Wittgenstein from charges of incommensurability? Putnam asks: "Has Wittgenstein simply immunized religious language from all criticism?" (p. 168) Putnam again refers to the texts to try to resolve the issue. He claims that religious belief is not immune from criticism because Wittgenstein presents himself as a non-believer, as, in fact, critical of some religious beliefs. For example, he says that deciding something by ordeal by fire is obviously absurd. So Wittgenstein talks about the possibility of "combating" elements of another culture, combating a language game.

In the end Putnam doesn't present any *theories* for a 'renewed' philosophy. He argues lucidly against scientism, reductionism and relativism. His positive contribution is in suggesting a different approach to philosophical problems, an approach we apparently learn from the reading of 'honest' philosophers like Wittgenstein and Dewey. As a programme for progress it could be considered somewhat vague. However, if *Renewing Philosophy* provides us with no more than a starting point, an intimation of a correct attitude towards philosophical problems, its value remains as a correction to misreadings of Wittgenstein and its powerful criticisms of currently fashionable philosophies.

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